

# PUTTING GOD SECOND

HOW TO SAVE RELIGION FROM ITSELF

By  
Rabbi Donniel Hartman

*Book Club Leader's Guide*

Edited by Rabbi Lauren Berkun



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון  
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# Book Club Leader's Guide

## ***Putting God Second***

How to Save Religion from Itself

### ***Welcome:***

We are thrilled that you have chosen to offer a Book Club program utilizing Rabbi Donniel Hartman's book, "Putting God Second: How to Save Religion from Itself." This Leader's Guide is meant to serve as a resource and tool for you as the facilitator of the Book Club. In addition to this written Leader's Guide, there are two one-hour webinars with Donniel Hartman (one intended as an introductory lecture to kick-off your Book Club, and one as a concluding lecture at the end of your Book Club program). These webinars (offered live on March 31 and June 15, 2016) were recorded and are available on the Book Club web page, so that you can offer this Book Club program at any time that is convenient for your community. In addition, there is a Sourcebook of all the primary sources that are referenced in "Putting God Second."

The written Leader's Guide provides a summary outline of each chapter, with selected quotes from the book. This outline can serve as a useful tool for preparing to facilitate a Book Club session, and/or may provide some key quotes from each chapter to review with your students. We have made this Leader's Guide available to you in a Word document, so that you can cut and paste from the guide to create study sheets for your Book Club sessions.

In addition, the Leader's Guide provides some recommended discussion questions for each chapter of "Putting God Second" and some recommended hevruta questions for select primary sources in the Sourcebook.

### ***How to Implement the "Putting God Second" Book Club:***

The Book Club program includes two webinars with Donniel Hartman, a Leader's Guide, and a Sourcebook. The book contains eight chapters, each one rich with text and ideas for discussion. It would be possible to offer this program as a **10-part series** beginning with the opening webinar, then eight book club study sessions devoted to each of the eight chapters in the book, and concluding with the final webinar.

As the facilitator, you might choose to offer this program in as many or as few sessions as you decide for your community. The Leader's Guide and Sourcebook, both offered in Word documents, will serve as a resource for you to make your own educational decisions and to cut-and-paste into your own Book Club discussion study sheets.

### ***Suggested Structure for a Book Club Program:***

#### **A. 10-Part Book Club Series**

##### *Session 1: Opening Webinar*

1. Watch Donniel's Opening Webinar
2. Discuss
3. Assign one book chapter for each of the next 8 sessions

##### *Sessions 2-9: Book Club Study Sessions (covering one chapter each session)*

1. Review the main points of the book chapter (utilizing Leader's Guide outline)
2. Study Texts in Sourcebook (utilizing discussion questions in Leader's Guide)
3. Discuss

##### *Session 10: Closing Webinar*

1. Watch Donniel's Closing Webinar
2. Discuss

#### **B. 3-Part Book Club Series\***

##### *Session 1: Opening Webinar*

1. Watch Donniel's Opening Webinar
2. Discuss
3. Assign entire book to read by Session 2 date

##### *Session 2: Book Club Discussion*

1. Review book (utilizing Leader's Guide outline, highlighting key quotes from each chapter)
2. Study Texts in Sourcebook (select one or two sources from each chapter to learn and discuss)
3. Dialogue about main themes of book

##### *Session 3: Closing Webinar*

1. Watch Donniel's Closing Webinar
2. Discuss

\*In this model, you might devote any number of sessions in between the two webinar presentations to discuss the book and study the sources. With the help of this Leader's Guide and the Sourcebook, you can create as many or as few study sessions with this material as your community calendar allows.

**Contact Us:**

We hope that these curricular materials will provide stimulating, meaningful, and relevant high-level Jewish learning for you and your community.

Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions related to this Book Club Project and these resources.

May this learning help your community go from strength to strength,

Rabbi Lauren Berkun, Director of Rabbinic and Synagogue Programs

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## ***Table of Contents***

<b>INTRODUCTION:</b> Religion's Autoimmune Disease.....	9
<b>CHAPTER ONE:</b> You Are Your Brother's Keeper: The Religious Ethic of ..... Non-Indifference .....	13
<b>CHAPTER TWO:</b> God Intoxication and God Manipulation.....	19
<b>CHAPTER THREE:</b> Recovering from God Intoxication.....	27
<b>CHAPTER FOUR:</b> Immunizing Against God Manipulation .....	35
<b>CHAPTER FIVE:</b> When Scripture Is the Problem .....	43
<b>CHAPTER SIX:</b> Do I Have to Believe in God to Be a Good Jew?.....	51
<b>CONCLUSION:</b> Putting God First by Putting God Second.....	57





# INTRODUCTION

## *Religion's Autoimmune Disease*

### ***Introduction:***

- Every Yom HaZikaron, when special Kaddish is recited and the fallen are designated as having died “*al Kiddush Hashem*” – in the sanctification of God’s name, Donniel wonders what God and the sanctification of God’s name have to do with fighting for our country – let alone the death of his innocent brother-in-law (killed in the 1982 Lebanon War).
- Why is there an intrinsic association between the wars we fight and the will of God?
- When “God” is conflated with “country,” does it serve the moral and spiritual aspirations of Israel – or does it undermine them?
- Is God a force for good – for challenging, prodding, critiquing, and correcting national interests and policies – or does the divine stamp of approval provide religious cover for immoral acts motivated by self-interest?

### ***The Return of God***

- In the history of monotheist religions, monotheism became a mixed blessing and a double-edged sword.
- As these religions entered the world stage, alongside their charge to love God and love humanity, they began to wage war with those who preceded or followed them.
- Wherever monotheism developed, it was accompanied by the belief that the One God could only be truly represented by **one** faith community.
- Therefore, together with the love of neighbor came the hatred of the other. Together with kindness to those in need came the murder of those who disagreed.
- While the majority of 20<sup>th</sup> century conflicts were clashes of a predominantly national and *secular* political nature, this geopolitical picture has shifted today.
- **Return of Religious Violence:** It is no understatement to say that the last two decades are painting the 21<sup>st</sup> century in strongly religious hues.

### **The “God Delusion” Delusion: Faith and its Consequences**

- The reemergence of God as a dominant force in world affairs, shaping both the fates of nations and the daily existence of ordinary individuals, poses fundamental questions about the role of religion in human life.
- **Foundational Question of this Book:** What does faith in God do to a person?
- When God enters the conversation and dictates human ethical and social norms, is it a force for good or evil? For action or complacency? For moral progress or moral corruption?
- How do our beliefs affect our identities – the way we see ourselves and others, and the way we treat people? How does faith change us?
- The broad geopolitical and socioeconomic impact of religion in the world today demands that people of faith take ownership over the consequences of their ideologies.

### **“Who Asked this of You?” Religion’s Noble Failure**

- One of the common features of all the monotheistic traditions is that their God aspires to create kind, gentle and compassionate people. SEE SOURCEBOOK #1-6 (*Exodus 22:20-23; Amos 8:4-7; Matthew 5:21-25; Mathew 25:34-40; Quran 2:177; Sahih Muslim 42:7107*)
- However, despite these noble teachings, the fact is that religious faith often emboldens individuals and governments to murder, maim, harm, and control others in the service of “their” God.
- The fact that a life with God does not seem consistently to make people better is a failure of religion on its own terms, and ought to be a source of consternation for any serious believer.
- This critique is not new, and was central to the Biblical prophets (SEE SOURCEBOOK #7, *Isaiah 58:1-7*)
- The irony of Isaiah is that precisely when the Israelite nation has returned to *ritual* commitment, God must angrily intervene to let them know they have fallen far astray from the path; that they are lost. God tells them, in essence, that while claiming to be a people who want to follow the divine path, they have abandoned it by ignoring their moral responsibility to others (SEE SOURCEBOOK #8, *Isaiah 1:10-17*)

### **Assigning Blame: “The Devil Quotes Scripture”**

- Advocates of religion tend to ascribe religious failure exclusively to human weakness and ignorance (SEE SOURCEBOOK #9, *Genesis 8:21*). We fail to live up to our aspirations, because we are mere mortals.

- Conversely, religion's critics locate the primary blame for the moral failure of religious people in religion itself. For such critics, religion itself is the original sin which "poisons everything" (see Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*).
- **Troubling Texts:** As Shakespeare sharply observed, "the devil can cite scripture for his purpose," and it is important to emphasize that the devil does not *misquote* scripture. He has no need, for the tradition provides him with all the ammunition he requires. Where religion serves to fuel injustice, it comes armed with chapter and verse.

### ***Religion's Autoimmune Disease***

- The central argument of this book is that religion's (and religions') spotty moral track-record cannot be written off to either a core corruption in human nature or an inherently corrupt scripture.
- Life of faith, while obligating moral sensitivity, also very often activates a critical flaw that supports and encourages immoral impulses.
- These impulses, given free reign to flourish under the cloak of religious piety, undermine the ultimate moral agendas of religions, and the types of communities and societies they aspire to build.
- The argument of this book is that this critical flaw, when recognized, can be overcome.
- This diagnosis is meant to help conceptualize the dynamics through which religions so often undermine their own deepest values and attack their professed goals.
- While God obligates the good and calls us into its service, God simultaneously and inadvertently makes us morally blind. God's *presence*, and the human religious desire to live in relationship with God, often distracts religion's adherents from their traditions' core moral truths.

### ***Judaism: A Model Patient***

- If religion is not all bad, where does it go wrong? Where are the weak links?
- This book is an attempt to answer these questions through a sustained analysis of monotheism's autoimmune diseases as expressed in the Jewish tradition, and a prescription for how they can be overcome.
- **Judaism as Case Study:** This book uses Judaism to make the point of how monotheism can attack and undermine its own goals, as well as how a religion can heal itself from itself.
- Donniel explains his choice of Judaism as the case study: "I choose Judaism because as a member of this faith, I have a personal investment in exposing its shortcomings for the sake of attempting to heal them – offering a narrative of what my tradition can and ought to stand for. In truth, I am trying to save my own religion from itself."

- In the final analysis, it is up to the heirs of a religious tradition, in every generation, to decide which sources will inform our religious consciousness and sensibilities. It is up to the advocates and adherents of God's word honestly to assess whether religion is achieving its own core objectives, and if not, fearlessly to set it on a path towards correction.

### ***Chapter Discussion Questions:***

1. How do you understand the relationship between monotheism and extremism/fundamentalism?
2. What do you believe is the role of religion in a person's life? In your opinion, how does faith shape a person?
3. Do you agree with Donniel that Judaism (and/or all religions) suffer from an autoimmune disease? Why do you think that religion is paradoxically a source of violence and injustice?
4. Can you think of some recent examples of the phenomenon of Judaism's autoimmune disease? Can you think of some recent examples in other religious traditions?

### ***Selected Sourcebook Text Study Questions:***

#### **1. Amos 8:4-7**

How does Amos portray the moral failure of the Israelite people? What is the relationship between ritual practice and interpersonal ethics?

#### **2. Isaiah 58:1-7; 1:10-17**

What is the tragic irony in the religious life of the Israelite nation, according to Isaiah? How does God relate to the ritual observance of the Israelites, in light of their moral failings?

## CHAPTER ONE

### *You Are Your Brother's Keeper: The Religious Ethic of Non-Indifference*

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#### ***Abraham's Way***

- Abraham's selection for a special relationship with God – his mission to do “what is just and right” – locates **ethical behavior** as the cornerstone of Jewish religious life.
- The essence of this calling is the obligation to ***“not remain indifferent.”***
- Abraham refused to remain indifferent, and consequently saw himself as responsible and compelled to intervene on Sodom's behalf. When confronted by injustice, he follows an ethic of non-indifference and in so doing provides a model for what it means to “keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right.” (SEE SOURCEBOOK #1 AND #3, *Genesis 18:17-19; 23-25*)

#### ***Down by the Well: Following Abraham's Path***

- Rebecca and Moses follow in Abraham's path, through stories involving wells. A well in the Bible is a microcosm of the public sphere, a place of meeting for both locals and travelers. (SEE SOURCEBOOK #4 AND #5, *Genesis 24:10-20, Exodus 2:16-19*)
- In the biblical well narratives, ancient Israelite heroes meet others who have come to fill their basic material needs, and in the process find themselves in need of kindness, protection, or both.

#### ***The Path of Moses***

- What quality does Moses embody that merits him to give them the Torah and to become, alongside Abraham, the most significant figure in Jewish history? The answer is that, like Abraham, he is quintessentially a person who takes responsibility for the protection and well-being of others.
- Moses *chooses* to see, and like Abraham he can neither ignore nor rationalize away what is in front of him. He witnesses injustice and acts to repair it, even when to do so is likely to hold dire consequence for him personally (SEE SOURCEBOOK #6, *Exodus 2:11-15*).

- Moses' response to God's reaction to the Golden Calf is unequivocal: *If you want me, then you have to know that I am not the type of person to remain indifferent to the suffering of my people*. Moses is defined by the inability to avert his eyes from the plight of those people, however flawed, with whom he shares a collective bond (SEE SOURCEBOOK #7-9, *Exodus 32:32*, *BT Berakhot 32a* and *Avot de-Rabbi Natan, Ch. 2*).

### ***The Lost Prophet – Jonah***

- Jonah is the counter-model to the prophetic tradition: a book about a prophet who has lost his way, and who, because of his “jealousy” for God, refuses to take responsibility for the needs of others. Forcing him to see, and obligating him to overcome this indifference, is the central message of his biblical story (SEE SOURCEBOOK #10-11, *Jonah 1:1-3, 4:1-3*).
- In an interesting twist, God here echoes the voice of Abraham pleading for the lives of the people of Sodom, reminding Jonah of this core Jewish value. Cynical and embittered, Jonah has given up on his moral obligation towards his fellow human beings, and here it is God who must bring him back to the “way of the Lord” (SEE SOURCEBOOK #12, *Jonah 4:10-11*).

### ***A Seeing God***

- Seeing, listening, and responding become the dominant motifs in the ‘character’ of God as portrayed throughout the Bible. The God of Abraham exhibits the ethic of responsibility on a national scale in response to the suffering of the Jewish people enslaved in Egypt (SEE SOURCEBOOK #13, *Exodus 3:7-10*).
- With the revelation at Sinai, the biblical God begins to embody non-indifference in the form of divine legislation: enlisting the Jewish people to form a community of seeing and non-indifference. In the laws concerning the treatment of society's most vulnerable, the biblical language characterizes God as their keeper, the paradigm of one who sees, hears, cares, and responds (SEE SOURCEBOOK #14, *Exodus 22:20-26*).
- The God of non-indifference shapes Jewish law even more directly through the commandment of *imitatio dei* – the obligation to walk in God's ways by mirroring God's values and practices of compassion and mercy (SEE SOURCEBOOK #15-17, *Exodus 34:6-7; BT Sotah 14a; BT Shabbat 133b*).

### ***“Do Not Remain Indifferent”: The Laws of Lost Property***

- To walk in God's ways, to see oneself as one's brothers' and sisters' keeper, is also translated into a legal principle governing the interaction between individuals in the public sphere (SEE SOURCEBOOK #18, *Deuteronomy 22:1-3*).

- The laws of lost property play a central role in ensuring that the public space is safe for all who traverse through it. The public arena becomes safe only when it is a space of “fellow keepers,” in which individuals recognize their responsibility not merely to refrain from harming others, but to care for and to respond to their needs. This is the aim of the laws of lost property.
- The Torah even expands the scope of a person’s obligation to include one’s enemy (SEE SOURCEBOOK #19, *Exodus 23:4*). The ethic of non-indifference, of doing what is “just and right,” sometimes requires smashing the mirror of self-interest.

### ***“Do Not Stand Idly By”: Jewish Bystander Laws***

- The ethic of not remaining indifferent is also applied in the commandment to “*not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor*,” which the rabbinic tradition interpreted to mean active assistance when one sees another person in danger (SEE SOURCEBOOK #20-21, *Leviticus 19:16, BT Sanhedrin 73a*).
- **Tochechah**: This principle of non-indifference also obligates intervention when one sees someone harming him- or herself through sin (SEE SOURCEBOOK #22, *Maimonides, Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah 6:7*).

### ***Justice, Dignity, and the Laws of Tzedakah***

- **Tzedakah**: Perhaps the Jewish tradition’s most significant extension of the non-indifference principle is embodied in the myriad laws associated with *tzedakah*.
- The commandment (mitzvah) of *tzedakah* is connected by the rabbis to the core of what it means to do the just and right, and thus to walk in the ways of God (SEE SOURCEBOOK #23, *BT Yevamot 79a*).
- According to Maimonides, *tzedakah* is central to Jewish identity (SEE SOURCEBOOK #24, *Maimonides, Hilkhot Matanot Aniyim, 10:1*).
- The laws of *tzedakah* obligate the individual to transcend self-interest and adopt a view of him- or herself, and by extension of his or her property, as being in service of others who are in need – in a sense, to the extent of even *belonging* to them (SEE SOURCEBOOK #25, *Deuteronomy 15:7-11*).
- Within the elaborate system of *tzedakah*, a strong recurring motif is that one’s responsibility extends beyond the alleviation of physical hunger. What is required is a more complex obligation to see the destitute person in his or her totality.
- Non-indifference demands a nuanced sense of the problems the needy face, and the construction of a system of assistance commensurate with these needs. Of particular importance in *tzedakah* law is that the destitute maintain their dignity throughout the process of receiving aid (SEE SOURCEBOOK #26, *Leviticus 19:9-10*).

- These sensitivities include the value of giving in secret (SEE SOURCEBOOK #27, *Maimonides, Laws Pertaining to Gifts to the Poor, 10:8*) and the value of projecting a generous spirit while giving (SEE SOURCEBOOK #28, *ibid 10:4*).
- A second prominent concern in the rabbinic development of *tzedakah* law was the importance of ensuring that the required assistance was defined as “*sufficient for his need*” – not standardized, but rather left as subjective, varying from case to case. To see the other and care for him or her requires a customized response to each individual’s particular circumstances (SEE SOURCEBOOK #29, *BT Ketubot 67b*).

### ***The Sabbatical: Modeling Non-Indifference***

- How does one create an overall societal predisposition towards non-indifference?
- **Sabbatical Year as Social Framework for Non-Indifference:** The Bible instituted a number of experimental social frameworks designed to facilitate *seeing* by removing some of the boundaries that can lead to alienation and, consequently, indifference. Primary among these is the institution of *shmitah* (SEE SOURCEBOOK #30, *Leviticus 25:2-7*)
- **Sabbatical of Leviticus:** The Sabbatical described in Leviticus constructs a reality in which the walls of ownership are broken down and all members of the community enter into the fields together as equals.
- Every seven years, the hierarchy of ownership is dissolved, social status leveled. Less fortunate fellow citizens, who are considered “silent partners” in all Jewish fields within the normative laws of *tzedakah*, now become full partners in a shared land.
- **Sabbatical of Exodus:** As distinct from the Sabbatical laws in Leviticus, the Sabbatical laws of Exodus presents a different paradigm in which the poor are given total access to all Jewish fields. But in this version, rather than collecting side-by-side with the poor, owners are prohibited from collecting any of the produce of their own land. What emerges from the Sabbatical of Exodus is a sharply constructed exercise in role-reversal (SEE SOURCEBOOK #31, *Exodus 23: 10-11*).
- Our ability (or willingness) to see others is highly conditioned by the range of our experience. The Sabbaticals of Leviticus and Exodus present two models of repair. One way is to create a sacred time free of conventional social hierarchy (everyone stands together in the field); another is role-reversal. Both are designed to enhance our overall sensitivity to the position of vulnerable others with whom we share the public domain.
- **Shabbat:** In many ways, this is the core idea behind the most significant and frequent Jewish holiday, the Sabbath. Every seventh day, we are commanded to create a sacred time in which the distinctions between the wealthy and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, are dissolved (SEE SOURCEBOOK #32, *Deuteronomy 5: 12-15*).



### ***Zoning for Non-Indifference***

- As Jewish society moved away from a purely agrarian model to an increasingly urban one, the Talmudic rabbis struggled to ensure that within this new context indifference would not hold sway. One creative answer was through an innovative zoning policy.
- The Rabbis recognized the moral challenges of gated communities (SEE SOURCEBOOK #33, *BT Baba Batra 7b*), in which gatehouses create an extra physical barrier between residents and the public. This “cuts off from view” those needy who call out for assistance (SEE SOURCEBOOK #34, *Rashi on Baba Batra 7b*).
- Only when one’s home becomes a place of non-indifference, open and responsive to the pressing reality of human need, can it become a divine dwelling.
- The Talmud concludes that it is permitted to build a gatehouse, but only if it is constructed in a way that allows free and open access to the poor.
- The obligation of non-indifference is not only to see, but to create a society *in which seeing is possible*.

### ***Confronting the Bible’s Mixed Ethical Legacy***

- If the standard of non-indifference were the whole story, this book could now happily be concluded. But the story of Jewish ethics is admittedly more problematic (SEE SOURCEBOOK #35-46, *for selection of troubling texts on issues of gender, treatment of non-Jews, religious violence, and more*).
- **Need for Selective Reading:** Religion is currently engaged in a cultural and ideological war over its essential identity. The question that religiously committed people must face is which collection of verses to quote, emphasize, and weave into our tapestry of religion’s essence. Which narrative will ultimately prevail?
- **Danger of Judaism’s Autoimmune Disease:** Precisely because it defines the essence of ethical responsibility in terms of *seeing* the other and responding as needed, Judaism exposes itself to being undermined by the darker dimensions of religious consciousness, which attack our ability to see and as a result foster indifference and moral blindness.

### ***Chapter Discussion Questions:***

1. What does it mean to be “non-indifferent?” Do you agree that the essence of Judaism is the moral imperative to “not remain indifferent?” How do the main heroes and heroines of the Bible exemplify this principle?
2. What are the greatest barriers to non-indifference and to truly “seeing” the Other? What tools does the Jewish tradition provide us to overcome our indifference to others and to help us “see”?

3. Have you experienced Shabbat as a ritual of non-indifference? How might you celebrate Shabbat in a way that cultivates this consciousness?
4. How do the troubling texts in the Bible impact your relationship with Judaism?
5. What does it mean to do a “selective reading” of Judaism? According to this book, why is this an essential exercise?

### ***Selected Sourcebook Text Study Questions:***

#### **1. Genesis 18**

What does it mean to do “what is just and right?” How does the story of Abraham’s confrontation of God teach us about the essence of justice and righteousness in the Jewish tradition?

#### **2. Hassidic Tale**

How does this Hassidic tale illustrate the danger of religion’s autoimmune disease?

#### **3. BT Berakhot 32a and Avot d’Rabbi Natan, Chapter 2**

According to the rabbinic tradition, how does Moses react to the sin of the Golden Calf? What is his primary objective in restraining God’s anger and in breaking the tablets?

#### **4. Deuteronomy 22:1-3**

Why is the returning of lost property the epitome of non-indifference?

#### **5. Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Yesodei HaTorah 6:7**

How does the mitzvah of *tochechah* (confrontation/rebuke/criticism of others) serve as a form of non-indifference? Which practices of non-indifference do you find most “natural” or “easy” to fulfill? Which practices of non-indifference are most challenging for you: returning lost property? rebuke/criticism? *tzedakah*?

#### **6. BT Ketubot 67b**

What does it mean to customize *tzedakah* to the specific needs of each individual? Do you agree with Hillel’s manner of providing care to the poor man who was accustomed to a lavish lifestyle?

#### **7. BT Baba Batra 7b**

According to the Talmud, what is the moral danger of living in a gated community? What solution do the rabbis propose for living in a gated community, but remaining sensitive to the needs of the less fortunate? How would you apply this principle to your life and your community today?

## CHAPTER TWO

### *God Intoxication and God Manipulation*

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- As more and more people are being killed daily in the name of God, the question arises: What gives so many people of faith the license to intolerance?

#### ***Morality and Faith: Where Does Religion Go Wrong?***

- Given the prominence of ethical aspirations and obligations within monotheistic faiths, how do we understand the common disconnect between moral excellence and the life of faith?
- While there are multiple causes for the moral inadequacy that so often typifies human existence, a significant challenge lies squarely within religion itself.
- We must acknowledge that many religious systems, while commanding their adherents to act morally, also cultivate perspectives and predispositions that undermine this very goal.
- To understand the impact of God on the sphere of human morality requires both a ***diagnosis*** of the nature of the autoimmune disease, and an exploration of the places in which the tradition itself presents ***symptoms*** of the same condition.
- Monotheistic religions' autoimmune disease takes two primary forms:
  1. **God Intoxication** (or God-induced indifference)
  2. **God Manipulation** (or God-sanctioned indifference).
- For the ***God-Intoxicated*** person, the awareness of living in the presence of God demands an all-consuming attention that can exhaust our ability to see the needs of other human beings. The more we walk with God, the less room we have to be aware of the human condition in general, and consequently, our moral sensibilities become attenuated.
- ***God Manipulation*** aligns the identity and will of the One with the interests and agendas of those who lay claim to God's special love. The passionate yearning to be loved by God unleashes a sinful impulse to control the transcendent.

- **Idolatry of God Manipulation:** In a paradoxical manner, monotheism, which sought to uproot idolatry, gives birth to perhaps the greatest idolatry of all, the *idolatry of human self-intoxication*, in which God is drafted in the service of human self-interest.

### ***The Binding of Isaac and the Intoxication of Abraham***

- The Judaic paradigm of God-induced indifference is the Binding of Isaac (SEE SOURCEBOOK #1, *Genesis 22:1-3*).
- God Intoxication compromises Abraham's faculties. The moment he hears God's commanding voice, he ceases to see the boy standing next to him. Abraham's personality – his desires, values, and commitments – disappears the moment the word of God penetrates his consciousness. His intoxication with the divine eclipses all human concerns.
- **Paradox of Faith:** God commands the ethical, obligating us to see and not remain indifferent. Yet God's very presence can exert such a powerful gravitational force as to completely shift the rules of the game, the parameters of what we are able, or allow ourselves, to see. This is the essential feature of the autoimmune disease of God Intoxication.
- The *Akeidah* becomes a model of religious piety throughout Jewish Tradition, and the tradition of God Intoxication becomes a prominent and permanent feature of religious life.

### ***"With All Your Soul": Akiva's Akeidah***

- This model of God Intoxication finds its most powerful exemplar in the Talmudic figure of Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva argues that the Shema proclamation "with all your soul" obligates us to be willing to sacrifice our lives on the altar of love of God (SEE SOURCEBOOK #4, *BT Berakhot 61b*).
- God Intoxication creates individuals who yearn to show indifference to themselves as evidence of their non-indifference to God.

### ***"Strip it Off in the Street!": Sacrificing Others***

- **Sacrificing Others as Result of God-Intoxication:** The non-indifference of the God-intoxicated is characterized by a sacrificial impulse that is rarely directed exclusively toward oneself. In the Rabbinic tradition, we find evidence of a sense of obligation to sacrifice others on this same altar.
- Examples include the laws of *kilayim* in which a person should strip naked in the street rather than wear the prohibited mixture of wool and linen; or in which immodest clothes should be stripped from others in the street (SEE SOURCEBOOK #5 AND #6, *BT Berakhot 19b-20a*).

- This position represents a worldview, a hierarchy of values that puts God first.
- “I place God **before** me always” (SOURCEBOOK #2, *Psalms 16:8*). In this context, “before” can be understood in both of its main senses, as
  - a) a pervasive presence in human awareness, and
  - b) a priority that trumps all human needs.
- The two, of course, are related: the more God fills my field of vision, the more human needs recede.
- The *mitzvot* provide multiple opportunities to test where our commitments truly lie. Is my primary loyalty to God or to human dignity?
- God’s consuming presence can blind us from the shame, self-interest, social conventions, and ethical instincts that might interfere with our unhesitating submission to God’s demands.
- According to the Talmud, God’s greater closeness to prior generations stemmed from their willingness to sacrifice the dignity of others on the altar of the sanctification of God’s name (SEE SOURCEBOOK #6, *BT Berakhot 20a*).
- If a conflict arises between God’s honor and any human value, the former takes precedence. Within this religious framework, the willingness to strip off a woman’s headdress in the street becomes a sign of profound religious piety.
- Here the moral consequences of God Intoxication come sharply into relief. It shuts down our moral instincts to such an extent that we no longer see the woman standing before us at all, just the headdress deemed offensive to God. The field of moral vision becomes reduced to one test: to exhibit my complete devotion to God by suppressing every other competing consideration.

### ***“Have You Emerged to Destroy My World?”: The Intoxicating Religion of the Cave***

- Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (Rashbi) is another great hero of the Talmud defined by the model of God Intoxication (SEE SOURCEBOOK #7, *BT Shabbat 33b*).
- Encountering people who subsist not on miracles but on the toil of their labor, Rashbi and his son can see only the debasement of a life in which God does not consume the entire human field of vision. These archetypes of God Intoxication lack any capacity to tolerate, much less empathize with or care for, others living in a less God-centered universe. Guided by this mindset, they set off on a path to destroy the actual universe God created.
- Thereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: ‘Have you emerged to destroy My world? Return to *your* cave!’ With this pronouncement, God clarifies that God’s primary commitment is not to the cave and all it symbolizes, but to the world.

- True piety is expressed not in shunning the world, but by actively participating in its improvement.
- This story is a testimony to the powerful attraction, and the misguided destructiveness, of God Intoxication.
- In the very act of self-revelation, of making the Divine Presence accessible to human experience, God unleashes a spiritual virus on human beings that even God cannot control, a force that subverts God's plan for humanity while speaking in God's name. Even in the face of God's explicit command, those afflicted by God Intoxication cannot control their behavior.
- Paradoxically, because of the nature of this autoimmune disease, it is precisely those who pursue the most intense and consuming intimacy with God who can so often become, as a result of this very form of devotion, least able to hear God's voice.

### ***How Can You Leave Out God?: A Radical Revision***

- Hillel's message to the potential convert who stands on one foot is that the core defining value of the Torah is to treat others ethically. Rashi, however, reverses the plain meaning of Hillel's maxim, erasing the ethical claim of the original and replacing it with a focus on God (SEE SOURCEBOOK #8 AND #9, *BT Shabbat 31a*, *Rashi on Shabbat 31a*)
- Rashi cannot tolerate a definition of religious life whose essence is defined by how we treat others. More significantly, he cannot see the fulfillment of moral responsibilities towards others as an expression of a relationship with God. His God-intoxicated theology makes it impossible for him to hear Hillel's words – so he changes them instead.
- Isaiah's stinging rebuke of those who seek God in prayer and ritual while ignoring their ethical responsibility to others – perhaps the tradition's most direct indictment of the so-called piety of God Intoxication – has itself become ritualized within the liturgy for Yom Kippur (SEE SOURCEBOOK #10, *Isaiah 58:1-7*).
- There is a pointed irony to reading a critique of institutionalized ritual within an institutionalized framework – an irony that may have been the rabbis' motivation for including it in the liturgy in the first place. At the height of our ritual fasting and prayer, they challenged us to reflect critically on what we are doing in synagogue.
- There is a tragic irony in the realization that, as a community, we have taken the text that critiques the ritualization of the fast and instructs us to redefine piety, and effectively neutralized its dominant message by treating it as another holiday reading, another prayer, another way of setting God, and not other people, before us at all times.

### ***Divine Manipulation: Pious Indifference and the God of Abraham***

- **God Manipulation:** The great paradigm of God Manipulation is the myth of chosenness, and the ways in which it is used to serve the self-interests of the anointed, to the exclusion of all others.
- **Chosenness:** God of the universe is drafted into the service of one's local worldview. This self-interest under the pretense of piety makes God Manipulation such a difficult condition to detect, let alone counteract.
- Example of commander's reaction to Donniel's concern about the burial of Syrian soldiers: "Does this really trouble you?" – was not merely a result of the pressure of war. It was the product of a religious sensibility that is rooted in a sense of being chosen and loved by God *more*: a love in the context of a **zero-sum game**, in which there is never enough to go around. God's love and care for me necessarily diminishes God's love and care for others.
- **Election of Abraham:** With the election of Abraham, there is a different paradigm of God's relation to humanity (SEE SOURCEBOOK #11 AND #12, *contrast between Genesis 4:6-7 and Genesis 18:19*).
- God is now a biased judge who favors the elected one and treats others not merely in accordance with their merits (or demerits), but in relationship to what benefits the chosen (SEE SOURCEBOOK #13 AND #14, *Genesis 12:1-3, Genesis 12:12-17*).
- Through the principle of **chosenness**, the universal God is drafted into the service of a particular worldview, leaving all others devoid of access to God's grace. This is the platform upon which divinely sanctioned indifference stands, and the ground from which religiously endorsed injustice grows.

### ***Holy War and the Skewed Ethics of "Chosenness"***

- **Morality of War:** A potent example of this type of injustice can be found in the classic biblical treatment of the morality of war. Those who choose to be the enemies of Israel will also find themselves to be the enemies of God (SEE SOURCEBOOK #15, *Deuteronomy 20:1*).
- However, this idea is also extended to wars of aggression and territorial expansion (SEE SOURCEBOOK #16, *Deuteronomy 20:10-15*).
- Through the disease of God Manipulation, the standards of justice are set aside, and the God who is characterized as the judge of the whole earth is suddenly transformed into a God who blinds people to their moral responsibility.
- All of Israel's wars are now defined as holy wars, sanctioned and sanctified by God. The chosen one's enemy is not limited to those who attack, but expanded to include anyone who has something the chosen one desires.
- Conquest is not merely a vehicle of self-aggrandizement, but through God Manipulation is converted into an expression of the Almighty's love.

- God Manipulation is an expression of religion's autoimmune disease because its effect is not merely to blind me to my moral responsibilities to others; ultimately, it blinds me also to myself and the kind of person I have become. I cloak myself in the grace of God, whom I define as being with me regardless of what I do or deserve, attributing pious motivation and religious value to all of my behavior.
- Once we can no longer see who we have become, we have lost the ability to self-correct.

### ***"He Forfeited Their Money to Israel": The Cynical Logic of God Manipulation***

- **Symptoms of God-Manipulation:** The treatment of the "non-chosen" – example in legal status of the non-Jew in civil claims (SEE SOURCEBOOK #17, *Mishnah Baba Kama* 4:3)
- The Talmud claims that idolatrous non-Jews forfeit their property to Israelites because they fail to uphold the Seven Noahide Laws (SEE SOURCEBOOK #18, *BT Baba Kama* 38a).
- The idolatrous world thus finds itself in direct violation of their supposed covenant with God, as defined unilaterally by Rabbinic tradition. In the inexorable logic of God Manipulation, this standing transgression, an extension of an internal Jewish story, creates the self-evident grounds for divine sanction. Jewish expropriation of non-Jewish property is recast as the noble implementation of God's will.
- Those who think they own God believe they have the right to determine whom God loves as well as the legal implications of that love. When chosenness permits the coopting of God into the service of the interests of the chosen, the immoral becomes mysteriously moral, the profane miraculously holy.
- **Advanced Stage of God-Manipulation:** Forfeiting their claim to basic human needs, the outsiders have no rights; they are not seen. Most significantly, our descent into craven self-interest becomes clothed in piety, as our manipulation of God makes us blind to our own moral corruption.

### ***"Pour Out Your Wrath": The Warrior God of Israel***

- **Haggadah of the Passover Seder:** From a celebration of the victory of the enslaved and oppressed, we swerve sharply into a narrative of messianic national triumphalism.
- Chosenness corrupts us into considering revenge an acceptable, even redemptive, aspiration (SEE SOURCEBOOK #19, *Passover Haggadah*).
- The election of Israel, reflected in the Exodus story in the logic of the Haggadah, leads to the co-opting of God to destroy Israel's enemies.
- God's vulnerability to manipulation unleashes the ideology that God is essentially our personal and national warrior.



### ***Monotheism's Legacy: A Blinding Indifference?***

- **God Intoxication** shuts down our vision, clearing the way for divinely sanctioned indifference to the needs, sensitivities, and interests of others, and indeed even ourselves.
- **God Manipulation** enables us to justify unchecked self-interest.
- For those who claim to own God, there is no sin that cannot be purified, sanctified, and ultimately transformed into a virtue.
- These variations on monotheism's God-centered autoimmune disease are deeply entrenched. Are they an inherent part of the system, an unavoidable consequence and cost of religious life? If so, we must conclude that religion is destined to serve as a perpetual catalyst for moral mediocrity, corruption, and at times downright evil, self-defeated from fulfilling its aspiration to produce individuals and communities of moral excellence. Is this monotheism's enduring legacy to the world?

### ***Chapter Discussion Questions***

1. What is "God Intoxication" and how does it manifest itself in religious life? What is the danger of living with a deep awareness of the presence of God?"
2. What is "God Manipulation" and how does it manifest itself in religious life?
3. In what way is God Manipulation a form of idolatry?
4. Have you ever felt "intoxicated" by God? When? How? Did this ever lead to your indifference to interpersonal ethics?
5. Can you imagine a scenario in which your loyalty to God might conflict with your loyalty to other human beings?
6. How do you understand the notion of Jewish Chosenness? How and when is the idea of Chosenness a positive force in Jewish identity and Jewish life? How and when is the idea of Chosenness a destructive force in Jewish identity and Jewish life?
7. The book gives three primary examples of God Manipulations: 1) the idea of holy war; 2) the treatment of non-Jews in rabbinic law; 3) the call for revenge and triumphalism in the Passover Seder. Can you think of other modern examples of God Manipulation?
8. How do you respond to Donniel's concluding question in this chapter: *"Must we conclude that religion is destined to serve as a perpetual catalyst for moral mediocrity, corruption, and at times downright evil...?"*

**Selected Sourcebook Text Study Questions:****1. Genesis 22:1-3**

Compare these verses to Genesis 18:23-25. How could Abraham boldly confront God with moral outrage at Sodom and Gemorrah, only to be submissive and silent in the face of God's command to sacrifice his son Isaac?

**2. Psalms 16:8**

What does it mean to "set God before me at all times?" Do you believe that this is a core feature of Jewish life and faith? If so, how would one achieve it?

**3. BT Berakhot 10b and 20a**

Why is there a connection between sacrificing one's life for the sanctity of God's name and shaming another person in public? Have you ever witnessed this form of "God Intoxication?"

**4. BT Shabbat 33b**

Why do Rashbi and his son destroy the world after leaving the cave? What is God's reaction? Have you ever met someone who is so "religious" that he/she cannot tolerate the everyday, mundane aspects of life?

**5. Isaiah 58:1-7**

How do you understand the ironic Haftarah reading of Isaiah on the fast day of Yom Kippur? What do you believe the rabbis intended to accomplish when assigning this reading for Yom Kippur? Do you think that the Yom Kippur Haftarah recitation is accomplishing that goal?

**6. Mishnah Baba Kama 4:3; BT Baba Kamma 38a**

How does the Talmud explain the treatment of non-Jews and their property? Why do you think that the rabbis portrayed the relationship between Jews and non-Jews in this way? In what ways do you think that the ancient rabbinic approach to relations with non-Jews still has an impact on the Jewish community today?

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Recovering from God Intoxication*

#### ***Prophetic Failure and the Primacy of the Ethical***

- God Intoxication devalues the human enterprise and consequently the significance of human ethical responsibility. How can we recover from this spiritual autoimmune disorder? How can we reclaim our monotheistic traditions so that they fulfill their intended roles as forces for good?
- The prophets sharply critiqued the various manifestations of God Intoxication they encountered in their time. They insisted that religious devotion, without commensurate striving in the sphere of moral conduct, is a form of spiritual deviance and a perversion of the tradition's core values and goals.
- For example, the prophet Amos tries to redirect the core passion of a life with God to the moral treatment of others (SEE SOURCEBOOK #1, *Amos 5:21-25*).
- What the prophets failed to recognize – and why they ultimately failed in their mission to spur an ethical awakening among the Children of Israel – was precisely the “autoimmune-ness” of the problem. Rather than seeing this misbehavior as arising from an internal contradiction within the tradition, they blamed errant human nature, the inclination to sin.
- How can we perpetuate this prophetic message? It requires rediscovering and reclaiming a religious system that does not merely attempt to *balance* love of God with love of neighbor, but that clearly *prioritizes* love of neighbor over love of God.
- Healing God Intoxication begins by recognizing the ***religious primacy of the ethical***.
- **To recover from God Intoxication requires, in short, *putting God second*.**

#### ***“What is Hateful to You”: Asserting Judaism’s Ethical Essence***

- Classical Jewish tradition’s most prominent anti-God Intoxication figure is Hillel the Elder in his response to the convert who wants to know the essence of the Jewish tradition on “one foot” (SEE SOURCEBOOK #2, *BT Shabbat 31a*).
- Hillel declares that the essential telos, or purpose, of Jewish tradition is not ritual or faith in God, but rather a life that is defined by ethical sensitivity towards others.

### ***“The Rest is Commentary”: Hillel’s Ethical Lens***

- “The rest is commentary” announces that while Judaism is not simply an ethical system, it is only to the extent that spiritual devotion is conducive to, and does not in any way undermine, a life of the ethical that it may find a legitimate place within the tradition.
- The primacy of the ethical over what is conventionally understood as spiritual piety is established.
- For someone whose religious value system is defined by Hillel’s dictum, preventing a desecration of God’s name could never outweigh the consequences such an act might have for the dignity of self and others.
- Hillel takes religion off the path of God Intoxication and places it on a path toward moral excellence.

### ***“Great is the Respect Due Other Human Beings”***

- This prioritization of the ethical in which all the rest of Torah is commentary finds powerful expression in two legal rulings cited in the name of the famous Babylonian Talmudic scholar Rava.
- To fulfill the promise of Hillel’s declaration the ethical must be integrated into our everyday lives by way of binding communal norms. The ethical becomes primary when it is established as the overriding value that guides the formulation of these norms.
- **Case #1: Shabbat or Hanukkah candles?** What if a person only has enough money for either Sabbath *or* Hanukkah candles? Which takes precedence? (SEE SOURCEBOOK #3, *BT Shabbat 23b*).
- **Case #2: Megillah Reading or Burying the Dead?** What should one do if, on the way to synagogue to read the Book of Esther, one is called upon to participate in the duty of burying a member of the community? Here too, the underlying question is: What takes precedence? What are Judaism’s priorities? (SEE SOURCEBOOK #4, *BT Megillah 3b*).
- Both the lighting of Hanukkah candles and the reading of the Book of Esther are categorized by the talmudic rabbis as forms of “publicizing the miracle” (*pirsuma nisa*), symbolic acts pointing to the miraculous hand of God at work in Jewish history.
- Through Hanukkah and Purim, the tradition prompts the Jewish people to see God where they otherwise might not, countering the inclination to remain indifferent to God’s integral role in human life when not accompanied by miraculous intervention.
- Following the spirit of Hillel’s principle, Rava rules in both cases that Jewish tradition prioritizes seeing human needs and concerns over seeing and publicizing God’s presence.

### ***“Do That Which is Right and Good”: Beyond the Law***

- The primacy of the ethical enshrined in Hillel’s maxim is further developed within Jewish tradition through the principle of “beyond the requirement of the law” (*lifnim mishurat ha-din*).
- “Beyond the requirement of the law” can prompt us to be guided by the ethical in those areas the law does not cover. It also establishes a standard with the capacity to critique and correct existing laws that do not reflect the primacy of the ethical.
- **Nachmanides on Deut. 6:18:** The commandment to “do that which is right and good within the sight of the Lord” is a response to an inherent limitation of any legal system: the impossibility of addressing every possible case.
- No legal system can exhaust every instance, every dilemma that a person will face within the course of his or her life. How do we approach such moments? For Nachmanides, as for Rava and Hillel before him, the answer is to be guided by the desire to become “worthy of being called *good and upright*” (SEE SOURCEBOOK #5, *Nachmanidies, Commentary on Deuteronomy 6:18*).

### ***“The Quality of Piety and the Way of Wisdom”: Correcting the Law***

- **Maimonides** takes Hillel’s principle a step further. Commenting on the biblical permissibility to “work an idolatrous slave with rigor,” Maimonides explains, “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” (SEE SOURCEBOOK #6, *Maimonides, Hilkhhot Avadim, 9:8*).
- The radical nature of this statement lies in its clear implication that these qualities are *not necessarily found within the law itself*. According to Maimonides, in other words, Hillel’s core principle is an aspiration that the current legal system does not always fulfill.
- While acknowledging the scriptural law, Maimonides invokes the principle of the primacy of the ethical – of “beyond” – to create a sphere of spiritual aspiration for moral excellence that transcends the current state of the law.

### ***“Merciful People Who Have Mercy Upon All”: Jewish Ethical Identity***

- Maimonides argues that the essence of what it means to be a Jew is to be merciful (SEE SOURCEBOOK #6, *Maimonides, Hilkhhot Avadim, 9:8*). Therefore, according to Maimonides: one is in fact *less Jewish* when following the law than when going beyond what it requires.
- To merit the name “children of Abraham,” we must in essence make going beyond the requirement of the law the ultimate law, the normative value system that guides how we process and transform the legal system we inherit.

- Maimonides argues that going beyond the law is a form of *imitation dei* (IBID). To stray from the path of wisdom and piety is thus not only to disconnect oneself from the essence of Jewish identity, but to distance oneself from God.

### ***“Because They Followed the Law”: The Legal Duty to Go Beyond***

- Maimonides strongly reinforces the imperative not merely to state the importance of the ethical, but to create an alternative God-language in which God accepts – indeed, demands – a seemingly secondary role within the religious system.
- This transformation of “beyond the law” into the essence of the law itself is poignantly expressed in a Talmudic passage that discusses the reasons the Second Temple was destroyed and the Jewish people sent into exile (SEE SOURCEBOOK #7, *BT Baba Metzia 30b*).

### ***“Go and Return It”: A Case Study in “Beyond”***

- The primacy of the ethical must be expressed in its role as the guiding mechanism for resolving legal conflicts, for stepping in where law is silent, and serving as corrective where the law itself fails to live up to the standards that comprise the essence of Jewish tradition, identity, and community.
- See story of Shimon ben Shetah, SOURCEBOOK #8, *JT Baba Metzia 2:5*.

### ***“What Do People Say About Him?”: Human Ethics and God’s Reputation***

- What constitutes the desecration or profanation of God’s name? The Talmud offers an extremely surprising response: “Rav said: ‘If, for example, I [i.e. someone like me, a rabbi] take meat from the butcher, and do not pay him at once.’ ” (SEE SOURCEBOOK #9, *BT Yoma 86a*).
- **Rabbis held to a higher standard:** The rabbi, perceived to be a carrier of God’s name, who is uniquely responsible for embodying the positive impact of living a Godly life, thus also holds a unique ability to profane it.
- Sanctifying God’s name is indeed Judaism’s central mission, but God Intoxication misunderstands sanctification. Indeed, it is a misunderstanding of the nature of the reputation God seeks to cultivate among humanity in this world.
- The commandment to sanctify God’s name, and to avoid its desecration, requires that the religious person not think about what he or she believes *God* may want, but rather about what *people* want.
- Thus, the most theocentric of commandments is reshaped through the insight of Rav into the most anthropocentric of commandments, one in which a God-centered consciousness requires a shift to a human-centered consciousness by virtue of God’s

own stated priority; which is precisely to claim the recognition which comes from a good name.

- What engenders disrespect in the eyes of ordinary people? People value moral decency and dismiss dishonesty. Consequently, God's name and reputation are intimately connected to the level of moral decency of those who are perceived to be God's representatives or followers.
- The ultimate medium through which human beings assess a Godly quality is in the ethical treatment of others.
- When representatives of God appear to act in ways that do not adhere to the highest moral standard, their behavior reflects poorly on God, and consequently, God's name is desecrated. The inverse is also true. God's name is sanctified when God's representatives – rabbis, who also serve as aspirational models for general Jewish behavior – place ethical sensitivity and responsibility at the center of their lives, and by extension, at the center of Jewish identity.

### ***Ethics vs. Faith: A False Choice***

- Perhaps one of the greatest risk factors for the autoimmune disorder of God Intoxication is an adherence to the false dichotomy that we often construct between God and humanity, between faith and ethics.
- What Rav and Abaye teach is that the idea that we come close to God through acts of transcendence is simply wrong. We come close to God by putting God second, precisely as God has commanded us to do. Thus, truly to walk with *God* is to walk with *human beings* through all of our shared struggles and needs. When the ethical becomes the primary sphere of Jewish spiritual striving and the dominant focus of our religious culture, theology, and practice, we create a space for the divine to rest within our communities.

### ***Chapter Discussion Questions***

1. According to Donniel, why did the prophets consistently fail in their campaign to teach that religious devotion, without commensurate striving in the sphere of moral conduct, is a form of spiritual deviance and a perversion of the tradition's core values and goals?
2. This chapter argues that the healing of God Intoxication begins by recognizing the religious primacy of the ethical; to recover from God Intoxication requires putting God second. How do you understand the phrase "putting God second" as an expression of the "primacy of the ethical?" What often happens when you "put God first?"

3. Rava's preference for Shabbat candles over Hanukkah candles, or the burial of the dead over Megillah reading, exemplifies the value of prioritizing the ethical. What are some examples in your own Jewish life or Jewish community when you might prioritize the ethical?
4. When does strict adherence to the law sometimes lead to unethical practices? What are the places in Jewish life where you believe we need to "go beyond the letter of the law?"
5. How does the Talmudic understanding of the "sanctification of the Divine name" dispel the false dichotomy between faith and ethics?

### ***Selected Sourcebook Text Study Questions:***

#### **1. BT Shabbat 31a**

According to Hillel, what is the essence of Judaism? How do you understand his comment that "the rest is commentary?" How would Hillel react to the case of Rav Adda bar Ahava who strips off a woman's headdress in the street? (BT Berakhot 20a)

#### **2. BT Shabbat 23b and BT Megillah 3b**

What is the significance of the examples of Hanukkah and Purim in these sources? Why do these cases provide a particularly cogent example of "religious" mitzvot that we might assume would take precedence over "ethical" mitzvot?

#### **3. Nachmanides, Commentary on Deuteronomy 6:18**

According to Nachmanides, why do we need the principle of "beyond the letter of the law" within the Torah itself? What does this teach us about religious systems?

#### **4. Maimonides, Hilkhhot Avadim 9:8**

Do you agree with Maimonides that the central defining characteristic of the Jewish people is "mercy?" Do we live up to this description?

#### **5. JT Baba Metzia 2:5**

Why does Shimon ben Shetah demand that his students return the precious stone to the non-Jewish donkey owner? What is the principle lesson of this story?



**6. BT Yoma 86a**

What constitutes the profanation of God's name, according to this Talmudic text? How does a person's status or leadership position impact his or her ability to profane or to sanctify God's name?

Can you think of some examples in the Jewish community today that illustrate Donniel's argument (on p. 86):

*When representatives of God appear to act in ways that do not adhere to the highest moral standard, their behavior reflects poorly on God, and consequently, God's name is desecrated. The inverse is also true. God's name is sanctified when God's representatives – rabbis, who also serve as aspirational models for general Jewish behavior – place ethical sensitivity and responsibility at the center of their lives, and by extension, at the center of Jewish identity.*



## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Immunizing Against God Manipulation*

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#### ***“Because It Is Good”***

- God Manipulation, the condition that sanctions self-interest with the stamp of divine and religious approval, has proven a pervasive and perilous symptom of monotheism throughout the history of human social life. To protect humanity from this perversion of God’s image, and to immunize religion from itself, is an existential need of the utmost urgency.
- Any serious attempt at a theological remedy to God Manipulation must begin by affirming not only the *primacy* of the good, but its *autonomy*, or independence, from the claims of faith.
- Only when the autonomy of the ethical is established and embraced will monotheistic religion become immune from God Manipulation.
- When religion no longer has the authority to determine the good, all religious doctrine must adhere to autonomous ethical standards. No exceptions, exemptions, or loopholes in the name of God can ever apply.

#### ***The Possibility of Moral Knowledge***

- Human beings have the intrinsic capacity to know the good (see Aristotle, Kant, Walzer, Strawson).

#### ***The Challenge of Human Subjectivity***

- One of the primary criticisms of this assumption regarding the existence of an innate human capacity to know the good is the fluctuation and multiplicity of moral positions over time and among people and societies.
- The angst that a human-based morality leads not only to moral uncertainty, but to the chaos of moral relativism, is so deep that the claim for the autonomy of the good often falls on deaf ears.
- However, we do not in fact live in a morally chaotic and relativistic universe.

- Many principles, such as the values of human life, concern for others, prohibition on violence, and the minimizing of suffering and harm, have remained remarkably consistent over time and social context.
- The fact that we share universal moral principles, however, does not mean that we have a universal code of ethics. We may agree about the principles but find ourselves in disagreement over what weight to give to competing values when they conflict or what *constitutes* the good life.
- The disagreements are in the application and rarely in the core principles themselves (Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*).
- The critical point to acknowledge, however, is that this disagreement over application is not in any event the inheritance of autonomous “secular” human-based morality alone, but plagues divine based ethical systems as well.
- Not only do different divinely ordained systems disagree over the application of these principles, but even *within* one particular religious tradition, there is never a monolithic answer to the questions of application.
- The moment “the word” is given, it comes under the control of human interpreters, who assign to it diverse meanings. Revelation inherently involves a “fusion of horizons” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*).
- Regardless of the origin of scripture, there is no escape from human interpretation and application, or from taking responsibility for the choices we make about when and how to apply the “objective” word of God.
- Recognizing the centrality of humankind in discerning the good is not merely the foundation of “secular” ethics, but of religious-based ethics as well, as God counts on the capacity of humanity to understand and apply the Divine will (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*).

### ***To Err is Human***

- Do humans err in their assessment of the good? We certainly do. Does human moral knowledge change over time? Yes, it does. The obligation of the autonomous moral voice is to access the knowledge that we have at any given moment and to challenge our religious systems to comply.
- The difference between allowing religion to determine the good, and positing the independence of the good, lies not in replacing moral certainty with relativism, but in replacing the subjectivism of human interpretation of scripture with the best that the human intellect and conscience can ascertain at any given time. When we choose the latter, we add a layer of protection to our moral universe against the dangers of God Manipulation.

### ***“Where Were You When I Laid the Earth’s Foundations?”***

- God Intoxication is overcome by establishing the primacy of the ethical over religious theology and authority. Religion must teach that despite God’s transcendence, and all of the other philosophical and metaphysical dimensions the God idea implies, love of God may not be permitted to induce the type of intoxication that blinds religious people to the realities of human dignity and need.
- To the contrary, love of God must be expressed in our ability to make God’s name beloved to others through exemplary moral behavior. Religious thought and practice are evaluated according to ethical standards that stand primary to it, not the other way around.
- The essential feature of the theology of the Book of Job is the principle of an infinite gap between humanity and God. The act of creation assumes an omnipotent, omniscient God whose transcendence is reflected not only in power but in knowledge and wisdom (SEE SOURCEBOOK #2, *Job 38:1-12*).
- This conception of God gives rise to a neutralization of human reason: *Since I don’t understand how God created the world, how can I understand God’s plans for history? How can I grasp any of God’s calculations?* (SEE SOURCEBOOK #3, *Job 40: 7-9*).
- In the Book of Job, to invoke the Socratic formulation, the good is good because God loves it.

### ***“Not by the Judgment of His Senses”: Hirsch’s Religious Paradise***

- One of the classic Jewish arguments in favor of the position that the ethical must be subservient to religious truth was advanced by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century German rabbinic authority and philosopher Samson Rafael Hirsch in his commentary on the Bible (SEE SOURCEBOOK #4, *Commentary on Genesis 2:9*).
- For Hirsch, there is only one requirement that will allow the earth to be made into a paradise for humanity: to define the good according to God’s word.
- For Hirsch, religious people face a fundamental choice, the same choice Adam and Eve faced at the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The choice is whether to allow ourselves to create an earthly paradise by accepting God’s role as the arbiter of the good. I would argue that God Manipulation proves Hirsch wrong.

### ***From Determining the Good to Fulfilling It: A Counter-narrative of Divine Ethics***

- The theology of the subservience of the ethical that we find in the Book of Job (“It is good because God loves it”), translated into the modern context by Hirsch, represents a powerful narrative of what it means to live with God – a narrative that, as I suggest, culminates inexorably in divinely “sanctioned” moral indifference.

- This narrative, so deeply embedded in monotheistic religion (the molecular scaffolding, as it were, of this expression of its autoimmune condition), can only be redressed through a compelling counter-narrative. Such a counter-narrative, rather than framing God's transcendent greatness in terms of God's ability to *determine* the good, frames it instead in terms of God's ultimate and perhaps quintessential *affinity with* the good.
- To combat God Manipulation, moral good must be seen not only as primary to religious truth, but autonomous from it.

### ***Hillel's Inner Voice***

- In the previous chapter, I explained how Hillel's teaching argues for the primacy of the ethical. Upon further analysis, it yields a potent assertion of the autonomy of the ethical as well.
- Hillel does not quote a verse or commandment. Instead, he chooses a formulation with no biblical precedent. In his attempt to provide the key through which the tradition should be interpreted, he offers an articulation invented by himself, suggesting that Judaism's core religious principle is both simple and universally accessible based on one's internal conscience (SEE SOURCEBOOK #5, *BT Shabbat 31a*).
- The good around which we aspire to organize our religious lives is not a principle we learn from the tradition, but one rooted in the self-evidence of our moral and rational capacities.

### ***Abraham's Argument***

- If Hillel establishes a definitive template for a Jewish narrative of the autonomous good, its founding archetype can be identified in the voice of Abraham at Sodom (SEE SOURCEBOOK #6, *Genesis 18:23-25*).
- His response exemplifies not only the overriding obligation not to remain indifferent, but the essential independence of the ethical sensibility.
- Abraham assumes that there is a self-evident good independent of God's word, which obligates God no less than it obligates humanity.
- Abraham offers a definition of divine transcendence that does not ascribe to God the power to unilaterally define morality. Rather, he proclaims, *You are worthy of being the judge of the whole earth only to the extent that you live up to universal standards of justice*.
- Shimon Ben Shetah provides another good example of this principle. His commitment to an autonomous good is emphasized through the use of the term "barbarian," (*barbarun*) which is not a Jewish term but a Greek one. His moral standards are not determined by Jewish tradition, but by a universal, independent concept of the just and right (SEE SOURCEBOOK #7, *JT Baba Metzia 2:5*).

### ***“Rational Commandments”: Legislating Ethical Autonomy***

- According to Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, to live in accordance with God’s will means to follow God’s prescription as precisely as possible. The law is like medicinal herbs, whose effectiveness depends on our using them according to the exact prescription and recipe ordered by God (SEE SOURCEBOOK #8, *The Kuzari, Part 1*).
- This theology leaves no room for the concept of “beyond the requirement of the law.”
- In contrast, Nachmanides’ view is that *God loves the good because it is good*; therefore we are called to fill in details where the law has not yet spoken. Continually construct a new Torah that is grounded in your autonomous moral conscience, founded on the obligations that conscience prescribes (SEE SOURCEBOOK #9, *Commentary on Deuteronomy 6:18*).
- Nachmanides argues that there are rational commandments that are universally accessible to the human intellect and thus require no prophetic instruction (SEE SOURCEBOOK #10, *Commentary on Genesis 6:13*, AND SOURCEBOOK #11, *BT Yoma 67b*).

### ***Redefining Religious Purpose***

- Given the commandment to do the “right and good,” and the authority of autonomous human knowledge of the good, what purpose or value does a system of particular commandments serve at all?
- The purpose of religious systems, commandments and laws is not to determine moral good in the first place. Rather, they function to remind us of that which we already know, and their primary role is to “condition” us to overcome the most significant cause of moral mediocrity, which is not lack of *knowledge*, but weakness of *character*.
- When religion is doing its “job,” it fills the role of moral mentor, reminding, cajoling, exhorting, and at times threatening its adherents to check their self-interest and become people who see others, who cannot remain indifferent, and who define their religious identities as agents of moral good.
- But in order for religion to fulfill this task, it must redefine both the concept and role of God, and thus the susceptibility of its adherents to manipulate God in ways that eschew moral standards in favor of self-interest.

### ***“With Wisdom and Understanding”: Sanctifying God in the Eyes of Ordinary People***

- This notion of the autonomy of the ethical is further expressed in the laws concerning the sanctification and nondesecration of God’s name (SEE SOURCEBOOK CHAPTER THREE #10, *BT Yoma 86b*).

- The God whose presence is affected by human behavior, defines both sanctification and desecration not according to the rules revealed and mandated by God, but through the experience and intuition of everyday human beings.
- Maimonides employs this principle in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, arguing that the standard according to which Judaism must be judged is not determined by the tradition itself (SEE SOURCEBOOK #12, *The Guide III:31*).
- Religious discourse, in other words, is not meant to be understood as a private, self-referential system. Rather, it must live up to the standards of the good and the reasonable that stand outside of it, continually subjecting itself to the evaluation and approval of “the eyes of the peoples.” Only when it meets this open, independent standard do we sanctify God’s name and avoid its desecration.

### ***Embracing an Independent Moral Critique***

- This discriminatory ruling in which non-Jews forfeit their property rights represents one of the great moral lowpoints of the rabbinic legal tradition (SEE SOURCEBOOK #13, *BT Baba Kamma 38a*).
- But the editors of the Talmud bring the discussion to a close with a provocative, self-critical edge, in which two commissioners of Rome provide a critique to the law. They represent outside voices who enter into our community, study our Torah, and find clear evidence of self-interested God Manipulation
- By choosing to conclude on this evocative and ambiguous note, the Talmudic editors advance the argument that God Manipulation can be overcome when the tradition opens itself to the standards of outside perspectives.
- These are not portrayed merely as the “official” voices of Rome, but rather as true friends whom the Rabbis felt had something critically important to say. As such, they serve as a model for how to heal God Manipulation. Do not cast all external critics as hostile enemies. If you do, you will lose a profound resource for moral self-renewal.
- Actively cultivate the voices, and embrace the judgments, of outsiders who articulate an independent moral standard.
- Like the editors of the Talmud, we must make ourselves into those critics, holding our religious systems accountable to an autonomous, universal moral conscience. And we must do so based on a narrative woven out of the sources of tradition itself.

### ***Chapter Discussion Questions***

1. Socrates asked whether something is loved by the gods because it is good, or is it good because it is loved by the gods? How would you answer this question? Do you agree with the foundational argument of this chapter that ethics is independent and autonomous from faith?



2. One of the most common critiques of human-based morality is the fear of moral relativism. How does this chapter handle that critique? What is the distinction made between universal moral principles and their application?
3. According to this chapter, why does the theology of the subservience of the ethical (found in the Book of Job and the commentary of Hirsch) culminate inexorably in divinely “sanctioned” moral indifference?
4. The primary argument of this chapter is that “to combat God Manipulation, moral good must be seen not only as *primary* to religious truth, but *autonomous* from it.” Donniel provides three examples from the Jewish tradition to illustrate the autonomy of the ethical (Hillel, Abraham, and Shimon ben Shetah). Which example do you find most convincing? Can you think of other examples from our tradition that exemplify this principle?
5. What is a “rational commandment?” Given the existence of independent, moral human reasoning, what is the purpose of a religious system?
6. What is the importance of external and internal criticism in a religious tradition? What are some examples of *external* criticism to the Jewish tradition today? What are some examples of *internal* criticism? When are these forms of criticism destructive? And when are they helpful tools of accountability to heal God Manipulation?

### ***Selected Sourcebook Text Study Questions:***

#### **1. Job 38:1-16**

How is this speech an “answer” to Job’s questions about God’s justice and Job’s undeserved suffering? How does the sense of an infinite gap between humanity and God shape our life of faith?

#### **2. Samson Rafael Hirsch, Commentary on the Bible, Genesis 2:9**

How does the story of the Garden of Eden teach us about the nature of “good and bad?” Who determines the good?

#### **3. Nachmanides, Commentary on Genesis 6:13**

According to Nachmanides, how could the generation of Noah have been judged for behavior that had not been revealed to them as sinful by divine revelation? Why do you think that “violence” is considered a “rational” moral principle?

**4. Maimonides, The Guide for the Perplexed, III:31**

Why do some traditional sages loathe the search for reasons and rationales for the commandments? How does Maimonides respond to this attitude? According to Maimonides, why is it a religious imperative to find a rational purpose for each commandment?

**5. BT Baba Kamma 38a**

How are the commissioners of Rome portrayed in this story? Why do they study the Torah three times? On what basis do they criticize the laws pertaining to the property of non-Jews? Through this story, what are the rabbis teaching us about the role of external criticism in a religious system?

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *When Scripture Is the Problem*

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#### ***The Problem of Scripture***

- The sites of moral failure within monotheistic religions are not all products of human misinterpretation or distortion. Sometimes God's word itself, scripture, praises and commands immoral acts.
- Scripture is filled with moral inadequacies and transgressions. The devil quotes it so freely because it is often all too suited to his purpose.
- What possible remedy could there be when the moral distortions of religion are found not in the failure to hear our traditions correctly, but in the bloodstream of tradition itself, in the numerous instances of immorality recounted and acted out in God's name?
- Having explored what happens to human moral standards when God enters the room, in this chapter we will now turn to the inverse phenomenon: What happens to God's moral standards when human beings enter the room?
- Beyond the human interpretive distortions of God Intoxication and God Manipulation, embedded in the nature of scripture itself is another manifestation of religion's autoimmune disorder, another moral distortion: this one affecting God, as a consequence of God's willingness to reveal the divine will to humanity through the medium of scripture.
- To understand the root of this distortion, we must delve into the nature and role revelatory scripture plays in the divine-human encounter.

#### ***What is Scripture?***

- If religious life is what human beings create in response to their encounter with God, then scripture, in the religious imagination, is what God creates (or inspires) in response to the encounter with human beings.
- The idea of sacred scripture is intimately connected to religious aspiration, and at its core, it is an expression of love, commitment, and devotion.
- ***Scripture is a divine response, in human language, to the deep spiritual yearning of God and humanity to live in relationship with each other.***

- There are always singular spiritual personalities (like Abraham) who are able live with God on the basis of an ongoing inner revelatory experience, immersed in an unmediated personal dialogue with the divine (SEE SOURCEBOOK #1-3, *Genesis 12:1, 17:9-11, 22:2*).
- For the vast majority of believers, however, this experience of being in a sustained dialogue with the divine is unattainable. It is for such people – the “average believer,” who possesses a sincere yearning to live with God as an integral part of his or her life, to hear and heed God’s will – that sacred scripture becomes essential.

### ***The Need for Singularity***

- The moral flaws embedded in sacred scripture can be traced directly to its central mission: *to communicate the will of God to the average religious believer*.
- For the ordinary believer, there are no tools with which to measure the relative authenticity of one revelation over another.
- The Jewish tradition establishes the singularity of its own core scripture, the Pentateuch, by attributing it to the prophecy of Moses, and instituting Moses as the only prophet with the authority to reveal divine law (SEE SOURCEBOOK #4, *Maimonides, Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah 9:1*)
- It is the need for scriptural singularity that underlies the Talmudic declaration that since the destruction of the First Temple, prophecy was stripped from the prophets and bestowed exclusively upon fools and infants (SEE SOURCEBOOK #5, *BT Baba Batra 12b*)
- The authority of the prophet is grounded in the belief that the word that the prophets communicate was communicated to them by God. The rabbi, on the other hand, makes no claim to have heard the word of God, and is ultimately judged by the content of his or her words.
- In the famous Oven of Achnai story, the danger of Rabbi Eliezer is that he demands loyalty to his position on the basis of the immediacy of his revelatory experience, not on the basis of its content. He is dismissed because he is trying to institutionalize ongoing revelation within the legal system, and this is what makes him a threat to Jewish life and tradition. As such, he loses his authority as a rabbi and becomes no more than a false prophet (SEE SOURCEBOOK #6, *BT Baba Metzia 59a-b*).
- The function of Singularity – the belief in this *sui generis* revelatory moment, whose transcendent status is transferred to its sacred scriptures – is to provide communities and average believers with an anchor-point of conversation with the divine. The challenge of Singularity is that, while advantageous and perhaps even necessary from a religious-existential perspective, it also puts scripture on a collision course with moral failure.

### ***The “Backwardness” Problem***

- As human societies evolve in their interpretation and application of their moral knowledge and intuitions, by definition earlier moments will fail to keep pace with this progress. Our moral intuitions now recognize as self-evident, for example, the values of gender equality, inalienable human rights and freedoms, cross-religious pluralism and tolerance, the equality of humankind independent of race, nationality, or religious belief
- Scripture is necessarily rooted in, and shaped by, a particular historical moment...
- In a certain sense, the experience of a modern person with the singularity of scripture is akin to that of Abraham in Sodom (Genesis 18), but with a critical twist. Abraham, upon encountering a revelation of God’s intent which he deems to be morally flawed, turns and challenges God to live up to his (Abraham’s) conception of the good. This challenge, however, occurs within the context of immediate and ongoing revelation, which not only ensures direct communication, but an immediate response and resolution.
- We, however, who “communicate” with God only through sacred scripture, are left with a text that remains the same even after our moral challenge. We may choose to reinterpret it, or to ignore it, but its explicit meaning and its moral inadequacies remain forever within the context of our tradition.
- By looking backward to hear the will of God as expressed in sacred scripture, we are embedding, by definition, a measure of moral backwardness within our religious lives.

### ***How Can a Perfect God Give an Imperfect Scripture?***

- How do we relate to a revelation that purports to reveal to humanity the inner will of God, and at the same time entails content that we experience as blatantly immoral and wrong?
- Why could God not overcome the challenge of “backwardness,” and place within the sacred scripture ideas and values that embody moral standards that transcend time, and are as relevant today as they were at the time of their revelation?
- If injustice is fundamentally incompatible with the concept of divinity, it follows logically that scripture must represent an ideal expression and standard of human moral behavior, and as such must be immune from the devil’s manipulations.
- But what if it *were* possible for a perfect God to give an imperfect scripture? What if, upon further consideration, imperfect scripture is the only scripture imaginable?

### ***Human Imperfection and Scripture's Limits***

- Sacred scripture, while purporting to provide for humankind a window into the will of God, at its core is an anthropocentric endeavor. Scripture must be capable of speaking in a language that human beings can understand.
- The fact that scripture's intended audience is human beings – requires that it be bounded in a particular place and time, and speak the language of the human beings of that culture and era, with all their moral and psychological imperfections.
- Scripture is thus inherently constituted as a compromise between divine will and human limitation.
- For example, according to Maimonides, the commandments of animal sacrifice represent a profound and necessary compromise by God in the face of the historical context of the moment of revelation. The attitude that allows for this type of compromise is pragmatic and pedagogical, treating sacred scripture not as the final word on God's will, but the beginning of a process of collective spiritual evolution (SEE SOURCEBOOK #8, *Guide III:32*).
- God can only reveal a word in a language and terms which people are capable of hearing and observing.
- In a world of moral progress and enlightenment, at times scripture is a beacon of moral greatness – love your neighbor, love the stranger, do not remain indifferent – and at times scripture is a mere reflection of moral mediocrity that is inherent within a certain social context.
- Scripture must be assessed morally according to a realistic understanding of its intended *audience*, and not by the identity of its author.
- The act of revelation, then, is not the formulation of an ideal code of behavior, but the beginning of a collective process of education.
- Maimonides expands on the pedagogical model of revelation by relating it to the staged process of human development. Similarly, scripture is not intended to reflect the perfect will of God, but the stage of human development at which it was given (SEE SOURCEBOOK #9, *Introduction to Perek Helek*).
- This understanding of scripture creates a space in which the image of God remains intact – with the critical caveat that even the most perfect God cannot give a perfect Torah to an imperfect people.

### ***Hillel's Key: Decoding Scripture with the Independent Good***

- Hillel's charge regarding the independent "good" can also serve as the key with which believers decode sacred scripture itself.
- Each subsequent generation of believers must apply this Hillelian Key to their reading of scripture. Only those values and ideals that embody the application of the moral good of their own era and cultural context are assigned the status of the word of God.

- Those that fall short are shifted to a different category, of moral compromise that reflects the capacities and needs of a people at a different stage of moral and spiritual evolution. Some we have outgrown and some were never meant to be implemented in the first place (SEE SOURCEBOOK #10-11, *Deut. 21:18-21, BT Sanhedrin 71a*).
- For the rabbis, not all verses of scripture are the same. The requirement of the rebellious son is morally flawed, and therefore needs to be excised from Judaism's legal system.
- The meaning of scripture is never self-evident: it always requires a Hillelian Key to guide us and prevent us from being led astray by its historical origins and pedagogical nature. As we progress and evolve, so does the moral standard required of us by the Divine Educator.

### ***A Different Leap of Faith***

- This pedagogical conception of scripture entails a “leap of faith” – to believe that wherever scripture contradicts independent moral truth, *it does not reflect the will of God*.
- This is a leap that requires us to understand that at times we fulfill the will of God only by going “beyond” the written word of scripture. That reason and morality are not the enemies of God or scripture, but the keys to their fullest actualization.
- Maimonides can serve here as our guide (SEE SOURCEBOOK #12, *Guide for the Perplexed II:25*). The more we root out the irrational from scripture through reinterpretation, the more space we make for God in our religious lives (SEE SOURCEBOOK CHAPTER FOUR #12, *Guide III:31*).

### ***What's Left of Scripture?***

- The fantasy of certainty is a destructive fantasy. It is a fantasy that sacred scripture is capable of redeeming us from these doubts, that its revelation contains a truth which enables us, with total clarity, to know the good and thus know what God wants from us with the certainty for which we so keenly yearn.
- Once we affirm the primacy and autonomy of the good, we are indeed left in a world without recourse to scripture for the arbitration of moral quandaries and conflicts (SEE SOURCEBOOK #13, *BT Baba Batra 131a*).
- The process of applying humanity's moral evolution to the interpretation and practice of scripture lies at the very heart of both the religious journey and the internal culture war that believers must wage if we are to save our traditions from themselves.
- The challenge of deepening a religious tradition that is guided by an autonomous notion of the good forces us to relinquish the fantasy of redemption from uncertainty. Is there a form of sacredness that can satisfy the spirit *without* misguided claims of religious certainty?

### ***A Different Choice***

- To save religion from itself is to understand that I have a choice – though a different choice, perhaps, than the one I thought I had. It is not a choice between the sanctification of all that is given (despite its corruption), and the rejection of all that is given (despite its profound value). The choice is rather to walk within my tradition, with my God, to hear the word and be inspired and instructed by it; *and*, at all times, to judge it.
- Sacred scripture is meant to create a relationship between God and humanity, a relationship in which the human partner is inherently challenged simultaneously to learn from, and critique, the divine.

### ***Making Scripture Eternal***

- It is ultimately the responsibility of believers to redeem our scriptures from their historical contexts.
- The pivotal rabbinic moment of Baba Metzia 59a-b (SEE SOURCEBOOK #6) posits a divine recognition that the Children of Israel are involved in an ongoing process of spiritual and intellectual maturation. Paradoxically, increased human agency and authority as carriers of tradition only enhance God's stature and the sacredness of scripture.

### ***Chapter Discussion Questions***

1. According to this chapter, in what way is scripture a “form of God talking?”
2. What is the source of the moral flaws embedded in scripture?
3. What is the “backwardness problem” of sacred scripture and what are some examples of this problem in our religious lives today?
4. What is the essential difference between Abraham and us, when we confront God based on our moral reasoning?
5. In this chapter, Donniel asks, “*How do we relate to a revelation that purports to reveal to humanity the inner will of God, and at the same time entails content that we experience as blatantly immoral and wrong?*” How did you answer this question before reading this book? Do you answer it differently now?
6. Why does a *perfect* God give an *imperfect* scripture? Why is an imperfect scripture the only one possible?



7. How does the process of decoding scripture, utilizing Hillel's key of the primacy of the "good," impact the way in which we interpret the Torah? If there is a morally troubling text in the Torah, how would "Hillel's Key" shape our understanding of that text?
8. This chapter suggests that we need a different kind of "leap of faith," to understand sacred scripture in light of the primacy of human moral reasoning. How do you understand this "leap of faith?" Can you imagine taking this leap? Why or why not?

### ***Selected Sourcebook Text Study Questions:***

#### **1. Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah 9:1**

Why is it so important to establish the singular source and authority of an unchanging Torah?

#### **2. BT Baba Metzia 59a-b**

Donniel suggests that a possible play on the etymology of the word, "defeated me" (Hebrew root, *nun-tzadik-het*) – which in Hebrew is related to the word for "eternity" – suggests an alternate, unequivocally positive gloss on God's proclamation: "My children have made me eternal! My children have made me eternal!" Why would the sages' rejection of the Heavenly Voice paradoxically make God eternal?

#### **3. Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed, III:32**

How does Maimonides explain the rationale for the laws regarding animal sacrifice in the Torah? How does viewing revelation through the metaphor of human pedagogy impact the understanding of the content of revelation? In your opinion, does this help resolve the morally problematic texts in the Torah? Is it possible to see the content of Torah as a compromise to human nature without losing a sense of the sacredness of the Torah?

#### **4. Maimonides, Commentary on the Mishnah, Introduction to Perek Helek**

In this text, Maimonides expands on the pedagogical model of revelation by relating it to the staged process of human development. Using this metaphor, what stage of human development do you think most contemporary readers of Torah are currently in? Inspired by this source, Donniel writes that, "even the most perfect God cannot give a perfect Torah to an imperfect people." How does this approach to the content of Torah impact your understanding of the nature of divine scripture?

#### **5. BT Baba Batra 131a**

What does this rabbinic teaching suggest about the responsibility of each generation to read and interpret Torah from one's specific social, historical and moral context?



## CHAPTER SIX

### *Do I Have to Believe in God to Be a Good Jew?*

#### ***Genesis Judaism: Identity as a Birthright***

- If one accepts the argument that religion must be saved from itself, and that the way to save it is by putting God second, a natural question arises: Why is God necessary at all?
- Do I have to believe in God in order to be a good Jew?
- To answer this question requires examining its component parts:
  1. First, do I have to believe in God in order to be a **Jew**?
  2. Second, do I have to believe in God in order to be **good**?
  3. And finally, do I have to believe in God in order to be a **good Jew**?
- The answer to the first is almost certainly - no. Judaism is primarily a modality of being and belonging, an ethnic identity with a strong collective consciousness.
- Abraham's descendants warrant God's grace by virtue of genealogy. They warrant God's blessedness and favor not by virtue of anything they do, but simply in consequence of being Abraham's offspring (SEE SOURCEBOOK #1-3, *Genesis 12:1-7, 13:14-17, 22:15-18*).
- This is what I call "**Genesis Judaism**," a Judaism of ethnic identity, of *being* rather than doing or believing.

#### ***Exodus Judaism: Identity Earned***

- Genesis Judaism culminated in the liberation from Egypt, and shortly thereafter a new dimension of Jewish identity was revealed. "**Exodus Judaism**" introduces the concept of Jewishness as a way of *believing* and *acting*.
- The Judaism of the Book of Genesis – a Judaism without Torah, without law; a Judaism of core collective identity in which belonging is secured through birth or marriage – is transformed in the Book of Exodus into a Judaism of aspiration and obligation (SEE SOURCEBOOK #5, *Exodus 19:3-6*)

- This is not an identity that is guaranteed. To the contrary, it is totally conditional: “If you obey me faithfully, *then* you shall be my treasured possession.”

### ***The Genesis Preference: A Transcendent Bond***

- Despite the dominant sense of Judaism as a religious identity of doing and believing, the dominant reading within Jewish tradition over the ages is that Exodus Judaism does not supplant or supersede Genesis Judaism.
- Jewish identity never relinquishes its Genesis mode. As a result, sin is not considered grounds for abrogation of the covenant (SEE SOURCEBOOK #6-8, *Lev. 26:44-45, Amos 9:8, Responsa Rashi 171, 173, 175*).
- Even a Jew who converts to another religion, for example, or a convert who immediately recants his or her conversion, still remains a Jew according to the dominant position within Jewish tradition (SEE SOURCEBOOK #9-10, *BT Yevamot 47b, Responsa Tzitz Eliezer 13:93*)
- The dichotomy between Genesis Judaism and Exodus Judaism even defines the core of the act of conversion in Jewish tradition (SEE SOURCEBOOK #11-12, *Ruth 1:16, BT Yevamot 48b*).
- Does one have to **believe in God**, then, in order to **be a Jew**? The answer of a Genesis-grounded Jewish identity is clearly and unequivocally – no.

### ***Do I Have to Believe in God to be Good?***

- Answer which emerges from previous chapters: If the major trend within Jewish tradition upholds the autonomy of the good from the revealed word of God – grounded not in divine command, but moral conscience embedded within the human condition – the answer is, again, an emphatic no.
- If the good is good independent of God, then the good itself is independent of faith.
- Does one have to **believe in God** in order to **be good**? Certainly not.

### ***Do I Have to Believe in God to be a Good Jew?***

- Here the answer is more complicated.
- The core construct of Jewish identity is grounded in the conceptual world of Genesis Judaism. But the evaluative judgment “good Jew” invokes the aspirational language of Exodus Judaism.
- Faith may be a necessary criterion to achieve the fullness of Jewish life.
- **Ten Commandments**: this biblical articulation of the “good Jew” standard – a standard that includes both principles of faith (the first five) and moral responsibilities (the

second five), suggests that belief in God *is* necessary (SEE SOURCEBOOK #13, *Exodus 20:2-3*).

- **Hillel vs. Rashi:** It is important to remember both Hillel's answer to the convert, and its rejection several centuries later by the medieval commentator Rashi.
- Hillel's teaching makes it plausible to argue that one can be a good Jew without believing in God. Hillel follows the path forged by the prophets – what is required of a good Jew is defined primarily in terms of ethical behavior (SEE SOURCEBOOK #14, *Isaiah 1:10-17*)
- Rashi simply cannot consider a notion of being a “good Jew” that does not include the life of faith.
- The clear implication of Hillel's and the prophetic argument is that the core definition of what it means to be a good Jew, and the central method of achieving closeness with God, is moral rather than faith-based (SEE SOURCEBOOK #15, *Psalms 15*).
- Do I have to ***believe in God*** in order **to be a good Jew**? I believe the predominant weight of Jewish tradition again inclines toward the negative.

### ***From God to Great?***

- While faith in God may not be a ***necessary condition*** for acquiring the status of “good Jew,” one of the core dimensions of religious life is its aspirational feature (the ***move from good to great***).
- It is precisely in the shift from good to great that faith in God becomes more critical to religious life.
- Faith is an essential component of Judaism's aspirations for the Jewish people. There is a fundamental difference between asking the question of whether faith in God is *necessary*, and attempting to answer the question of what faith in God does to, and for, a person.
- While much of this book has been an attempt to diagnose and remedy the moral diseases that faith can produce, my underlying premise is that faith in God should be treated and cured of its pathological side-effects so that it can enhance the human condition – not be excised from our life altogether.
- The first lesson of the Bible is not that God created the world, but that a life of faith is founded on the understanding that *we are not God* (SEE SOURCEBOOK #16, *Genesis 1:1*) God's radical uniqueness can function as the ultimate antidote to human arrogance.
- The 20<sup>th</sup> century has not only taught us the dangers inherent in religion, but also the dangers inherent in a world in which human beings perceive themselves as God.
- The God who is radically other creates a core equality amongst all who are not God, a fellowship of those who are but dust and ashes. This equality constrains us to see through our self-aggrandizement, combat indifference towards others in the fellowship, and apply the moral principles that we know all too well.

### ***Divine Potential***

- For the religious person, God is both transcendent and immanently ever-present – an ideal of radical otherness and holiness, and an agent involved in this world, concerned with human behavior, responsive to our needs – and both of these aspects of the divine play key roles in empowering people to live conscious, courageous, meaningful lives.
- Walking with God is not limited to doing what is just and right, but enables the opening of one's soul to the infinite.
- The valley of the shadow of death is neither a particular place nor an occasional instance, but the overarching existential reality of human life. I can walk through it when accompanied by the God who lives with us in the midst of chaos, who walks alongside us and empowers us to not merely walk through the valley, but to build a meaningful life within and despite it (SEE SOURCEBOOK #17, *Psalm 23*).

### ***"You Shall be Holy": The Unattainable Edict***

- This transcendent-yet-immanent God opens yet another dimension of human potential with the capacity to move the person of faith from good to great. The God who comforts and empowers humanity through its struggles also sets forth the challenge, "You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy" (SEE SOURCEBOOK #18, *Leviticus 19:1-2*).
- The verse does not say, "You *are* holy...", but rather, "You *shall be* holy," setting forth holiness as a commandment that the Jewish people are obligated to strive to fulfill.
- Humankind, inherently and unfathomably distant from the transcendent God, can never mirror, or even approximate, God's holiness. The obligation to be holy because God is holy is in essence a commandment that demands a constant striving for that which cannot be reached.
- It creates a spiritual path that is a perpetual journey of striving to become more. To live with a transcendent God is to acknowledge the infinite gap that exists between us, which has the potential to reinforce the sense of human mediocrity as we despair from ever transcending our original sin. To live with a God, however, who is also sufficiently immanent to command humanity to be holy *like God*, inspires us to believe in ourselves as it creates the obligation to dedicate our lives to bridging that infinite gap, even though we know it is ultimately impossible (SEE SOURCEBOOK #20, *Ethics of the Fathers 2:16*)

### ***The Tarrying Messiah: A Life of Aspiration***

- This charge to live a life of unceasing aspiration is reflected in one of Jewish tradition's rare, popularized principles of faith: "I believe in the coming of the messiah, and even though he will tarry, I still await him, every day, that he will come" (SEE SOURCEBOOK #21, *Traditional Daily Prayer Book*).
- The tarrying messiah rejects the notion that history can ever be fulfilled. The tarrying messiah does not allow us to lull ourselves into a state of awaiting salvation, to despair from our capacity, and thus responsibility, for improving ourselves and our world. There is no guarantee of redemption in life, and thus no room for passivity or complacency. There is only the aspiration to live in a redeemed world, and the consequent obligation to work towards it.

### ***Chapter Discussion Questions***

1. How would you answer the three sub-questions implicit in the query: "Do I have to believe in God to be a good Jew?"
  - a. Do I have to believe in God to be a **Jew**?
  - b. Do I have to believe in God to be **good**?
  - c. Do I have to believe in God to be a **good Jew**?
2. How do you understand the distinction between a "Genesis Jew" and an "Exodus Jew?" Which model best represents your own self-definition as a Jew? In your opinion, which model best represent the majority of Jews in North America today? In World Jewry? In Israel?
3. Do you agree more with Hillel or with Rashi on the question of the centrality of faith in God?
4. Donniel argues that faith in God can move one from "good to great" by cultivating a sense of both humility and empowerment. How do you understand this paradox? In your own experience, how and when does faith in God lead to humility? How and when does faith in God lead to an empowered sense of human responsibility?
5. What is the role of perpetual striving and aspiration in the life of faith?

**Selected Sourcebook Text Study Questions:****1. Genesis 12:1-7**

Why is Abram selected to be the father of the Jewish people, according to this source? Does he *do* anything to merit his appointment?

**2. Genesis 1:1**

In what way does this opening of the Torah teach humility?

**3. Exodus 19:3-6**

Is the covenant of Exodus a conditional or unconditional covenant? In what way is the description of the Israelite nation different here than in Genesis? What does it mean to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation?"

**5. Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, Tzitz Eliezer 13:93**

Which model of Jewish identity ("Genesis Jew" or "Exodus Jew") inspires the Tzitz Eliezer's ruling about the Jewish convert to Christianity? What is the essence of Judaism for Rabbi Waldenberg?

**6. Psalm 15**

According to this psalm, how does one draw close to God and dwell in God's presence?

**7. Psalm 23**

What does it mean for God to "be with me" in this psalm? In your own life?

**8. Leviticus 9:1-2**

What can we learn from the aspirational phrasing, "you *shall* be holy?" Can any human achieve the level of God's holiness? If this is an impossible feat, then why does God command it?



## CONCLUSION:

### *Putting God First By Putting God Second*

#### ***Turning the Spotlight on Ourselves***

- We may not have to believe in God in order to be a good Jew, but billions of us, statistically speaking, at least, do choose to make God part of our lives.
- God is likely here to stay.
- **Image of God:** Monotheism's history as a powerful force commanding humanity to view each other (and ourselves) as divine creations... expresses a profound assertion of the infinite value embedded in every human life (SEE SOURCEBOOK #1-3, *Genesis 9:6, Genesis 1:26-28, Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5*).
- The divinity we embody, the identification of a transcendent God with finite humanity that is the engine driving the creation story, is both a cause and effect of God's profound care and concern for humankind. In turn it obligates religious people, commanded to walk in God's ways, to be caring and concerned for each other.
- At the same time, religious advocates fail to acknowledge God's undeniable role throughout human history, and into the present, as an animating force for war, murder, and all manner of moral blindness (SEE SOURCEBOOK #4, *Exodus 32:26-27*).
- The dissonance between our traditions' contradictory moral voices makes them difficult to contain within the consciousness of a single individual.
- As Chief Justice Louis Brandeis famously remarked, sunlight is the best disinfectant. It is time for religion to shine a spotlight on itself, to subject itself to itself – to accountability according to its own standards – and let some sun shine in.

#### ***Insider-Criticism***

- Social criticism is only truly effective as an "inside" phenomenon (see Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*). Effective social critics are always insiders.
- When criticism is offered by one who is not invested in the enterprise, its targets become defensive and dismissive, seeing the criticism not as assistance but as a threat.

- We must be, and cultivate, internal critics who can look moral failure squarely in the eye, not as an indictment of religion, but as a failure of religion to live up to its own goals.
- Abraham did not stand as an outsider, asking God to be someone else; to the contrary, he stood firmly within the tradition he had learned from God, and in that place challenged God to *be* God (SEE SOURCEBOOK #5, *Genesis 18:23-25*).
- Insider-criticism is an act of love, and of loyalty.
- Ultimately, my claim is that *unless we are willing to put God second, we make it impossible for God to fulfill the role in our lives that, according to religion itself, God most yearns to fulfill.*

### ***Humility and the 'Otherness' of God***

- The first lesson of the bible is that God exists independent of creation. With this idea, a core feature of faith is proposed: that to live with God is to live with transcendence, with that which is radically "other" than us and anything we can ever know or understand.
- The religious impact of the concept of God's ultimate otherness is the imperative of humility, the recognition that to stand before God requires a posture of profound self-nullification (SEE SOURCES #6-13, *Gen 18:27, Psalms 8:4-5, Ps. 51:19, Micah 6:8, Isaiah 57:15, BT Avodah Zarah 20b, BT Yoma 87b, BT Berakhot 43b*).
- Yet it is also indisputable that this pious humility, which is certainly a legitimate religious value, is the soil that nurtures the autoimmune disease of God Intoxication.
- Thus those who care about the health of our religious traditions and communities have no choice but to confront it, and ask the fundamental question of what religiously inspired humility really entails – and how it can support, rather than undermine, our deepest moral and spiritual values and aspirations.
- But the inability to conceive that God could be anything other than first, that we are anything more than nothing, is what generates the problems of moral failure, blindness, and callousness in the name of God: perennially.

### ***"In the Image of God:" Divine Self-Worth***

- The most definitive challenge to a self-perception of radical otherness, and the brand of abject religious humility to which it gives rise is the doctrine that human beings are created in the image of God (SEE SOURCEBOOK #14, *Genesis Rabbah 8:10*).
- Creation in the divine image is not merely a statement of value, but of purpose: a special charge to humanity to engage in *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world, grounded in the responsibility to be God's partner in governing and managing creation (SEE SOURCEBOOK #2, *Gen. 1:26-28*).

- Abraham has hutzpah: he challenges God's wisdom, compassion, and judgment, and models this confrontational posture for his descendants to emulate. The recognition of covenantal empowerment that comes with being God's partner on earth is explicitly recognized, and endorsed, by God (SEE SOURCEBOOK #15, *Genesis 18:17-21*).

### ***God's Covenantal Partner***

- This idea of human empowerment as the direct implication of the concept of covenant is the cornerstone of my father David Hartman's life's work, the central expression of which is his book *A Living Covenant*.
- The entire rabbinic enterprise is animated by a sense of empowered self-worth.
- "The Torah is not in heaven!" the Talmudic Rabbi Joshua hauntingly and memorably proclaimed. The demand that God desist from intervening in the unfolding discourse of the Jewish legal tradition and allow it to enter into a new era ruled not by prophecy but by reason and intellect – an era in which Jewish practice and tradition become unapologetically "man-made" – is the ultimate expression of humanity's sense of value and empowered self-worth (SEE SOURCEBOOK #16, *BT Baba Metzia 59b*).

### ***Redefining Religious Piety***

- **Humility and Empowerment:** The God who is not created, and at the same time creates, embodies an essential tension at the core of religious life. On the one hand, God is posited in a position of transcendence against which radical humility is the only possibly human response. At the same time, a God who creates and shares divinity with humankind, inviting them into a covenantal partnership with the divine, diminishes that transcendence and requires of this human partner a profound sense of confidence.
- Religious life, then, is both a call to humility and a call to *Tikkun Olam* by empowered agents fully aware of our responsibility, capacity, and ultimate purpose.
- I believe that faith is less about balance than passion and commitment, and the challenge Jewish tradition poses here is to recognize each as an essential feature of a life with God: to embody each, in its own time and place, as fully as possible.
- Both religiously inspired humility, and religiously inspired self-regard, contain the germs of religion's autoimmune diseases. Completing the paradox, however, is that not only are they the cause – they are also the cure.
- The moral blindness of the humble believer that is the essence of God Intoxication must be countered precisely by the sense of empowered self-worth that demands human beings be put first.
- Conversely, the sense of spiritual and moral self-worth that comes with embracing the role of covenantal partner with God, can generate the delusions of grandeur that are the ground of God Manipulation: the myth that since I alone am truly God's

beloved, and God only sees me, I am religiously sanctioned to see only myself. The antidote to this religious narcissism is none other than a consciousness of humility.

- The challenge of religious life is to ensure that both humility and empowerment serve as the counterpoint and corrective to the other.
- Religion will be saved from itself, its autoimmune diseases cured once and for all, when we recognize that by putting God second, we put God's will first.

### **Chapter Discussion Questions**

1. What are the primary religious and moral values that stem from the idea of "Tzelem Elohim" (creation of humanity in the image of God)?
2. If "sunlight is the best disinfectant," where would you like to shine light today in the Jewish tradition in order to hold it accountable to live up to its own values?
3. What is the importance of internal criticism (rather than external criticism)?
4. What is the potential danger in humility, and how might it lead to the autoimmune disease of God Intoxication? What is the potential danger in human empowerment, and how might it lead to the autoimmune disease of God Manipulation? This chapter argues that the challenge of religious life is to ensure that both humility and empowerment serve as the counterpoint and corrective to the other. How do you believe this can be achieved in the Jewish tradition?
5. In your religious life, which impulse is the center of your "faith" – humility and the sense of God's radical transcendence? Or human empowerment and the sense of responsibility to engage in Tikkun Olam?
6. After reading this book, what are the main ideas you are taking away about the source of religious violence and injustice? What are the necessary solutions?
7. How has this book changed the way that you think about Judaism? God? Torah?
8. Do you agree with the book's concluding argument (on p. 170):

*Religion will be saved from itself, its autoimmune diseases cured once and for all, when we recognize that by putting God second, we put God's will first.*

***Selected Sourcebook Text Study Questions:*****1. Mishneh Sanhedrin 4:5**

What moral values derive from the unique creation of humanity, in which humans were created from an original single “Adam” (as compared to the creation of plants or animals, which were created *en masse*)?

**2. BT Berakhot 43b**

According to this rabbinic tradition, why should a scholar walk with a bent back? Why is it problematic to stand upright?

**3. Genesis Rabbah 8:10**

According to the midrash, what is one of the challenges inherent in the creation of humanity “in the image of God?” How does God correct for this challenge?

**4. Genesis 1:26-28**

This chapter argues that creation in the divine image is not merely a statement of *value* but also one of *purpose*. According to these verses, what is the purpose or role of humanity?

**5. BT Baba Metzia 59b**

What does Rabbi Joshua mean when he proclaims that “the Torah is not in the Heavens?” How do you understand Raban Gamliel’s assertion that “all that I have done was not for my honor... but rather in honor of you”?