

Sacred Fragments by Neil Gillman

Religious Authority

cut—no religion focuses solely on one or the other—but we are dealing with emphases or priorities, and Judaism's emphasis is that religion must transform the world of everyday human activity. We will have a great deal to say about Judaism's view of the afterlife and the "world to come" later on, but these doctrines never induced a sense of apathy about our responsibilities here and now, and in this world.

If the task is to transform the social order in the here and now, then the focus of activity has to be the infinitely complex range of relationships between human beings in concrete life situations. It is true that spirituality, purity of heart, and devotion are important, and many of the *mitzvot* involve ritual behavior with no obvious or primary interpersonal referent. But again, we are dealing with emphases and priorities. A mere glance at the first chapter of the book of Isaiah establishes that God's priority is the interpersonal *mitzvah*, the fate of the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed—not sacrifices and prayer. To use the distinction that became so central to Christianity, Judaism insists that we are "justified" (i.e., rendered authentic or legitimate in the eyes of God) by our "works," that is by our behavior and not, as Pauline Christianity would have it, by our "faith;" and among these works, morality is primary.

Judaism is pervaded by a basic confidence in our human ability to do the right thing. It is dangerous to speak in such broad strokes about a long and complex tradition, but again, it contains relatively little of the pessimism or fatalism about the human being that one senses in other traditions. The Bible (for example, Genesis 6:5 and 8:21) preserves a remarkably clear-eyed appreciation of our ability to do both good *and* evil, and it is never naïvely optimistic that we will inevitably choose the good. But in no way is the evil outcome predetermined by the fact of our humanness, by our intrinsic character. We do not believe, for example, that Adam's sin left its indelible imprint on all future generations, as the Christian doctrine of original sin teaches. Our freedom is real and unquestioned, as is our ability to repent and, even more striking, God's readiness to accept genuine repentance (as, in Jonah, He accepts Nineveh's repentance) so that we may start afresh.

Who Commands?

What should be mistrusted, however, is our reliance on our own intuitive human judgment as to what is good and what is evil in any one concrete situation. This, finally, is what, under the traditionalist interpretation of Jewish religion, justifies God's revelation of *mitzvot*. Every moment of our lives can bring us into a complex interpersonal relationship where values are in conflict, and where it is not at all clear how we should act. Human intuition, the Bible assumes, is far from infallible. We are easily blinded by self-interest. The Jew confronts each of these situations with the question: What does God demand of me now? The answer is the *mitzvah*.

To be a member of the covenanted community, then, is to bind ourselves to be partners with God in creating a certain kind of world for ourselves and our progeny. The *mitzvot* are the means for bringing this about. Their formulation in the terminology of law is our tradition's attempt to lend them a dimension of authority, a binding or structuring quality that flows directly out of the assumptions of biblical theology and anthropology.

→ Autonomy vs. Theonomy

We return now to our five options on the issue of revelation: revelation as the communication of an explicit verbal (or propositional) content (traditionalism); as the communication of a content that Israel appropriates in midrashic form (Heschel); as God's (commanding) presence in an I-Thou relationship with Israel (Rosenzweig); as the objective or external dimension to Israel's classic mythic structuring of the world; and as the human discovery of an ever-developing vision of salvation (Kaplan).

The correlation between our discussion here and the traditionalist position as articulated by Samson Raphael Hirsch and Norman Lamm is clear-cut and straightforward. According to their views, God dictated the Torah in words and letters. He thus dictated the covenant and its stipulations. Their authority lies in God's explicit words, literally understood. The authority is tight and powerful. The contemporary Jew who accepts the package takes upon himself the entire system of *mitzvot* for one reason alone: because they represent the will of God for the Jewish people.

It is also clear what happens to this entire structure should one accept Mordecai Kaplan's theological assumptions. However much Kaplan's God, "the power that makes for salvation," can be said to be the source of revelation, the content of that revelation is thoroughly shaped by the human community. The community, then, becomes the source of authority on what was revealed, and as the community's perspective on that content changes over time, Torah changes with it.

It should not be surprising, then, that Kaplan is reluctant to speak of the *mitzvot* as "laws." Kaplan rejects the coercive quality implied by the term. However meaningful that dimension might have been in the past, allegiance to the *mitzvot* today is voluntary and consensual. Jews elect to accept whatever *mitzvot* they do observe, and it is the consensus of the community that determines which of the entire system continue to be valid expressions of our most mature religious commitments. Those that do not should be dropped. It is understandable, then, why Kaplan refers to the ritual *mitzvot* as "folkways." They are the characteristic behavior patterns of our community. They can function in many important ways, but they are not laws.

The polarization of Lamm and Kaplan on the issue of religious authority stems ultimately from the tension within all of us between two conflicting impulses. Part of us intuitively wants a religious tradition to be grounded in an authority that lies beyond anything human, in a Being that transcends any individual and any cultural setting. This impulse lies behind religion's ancient and honorable role as a critique of all temporal forms of human expression, of the transient "spirit of the age," in the name of authoritative moral and spiritual absolutes. But this "heteronomous," or "theonomous," impulse is frequently challenged by an equally powerful "autonomous" impulse, which insists that it is the right and proper task for us—indeed, for all human beings and communities—to figure out for ourselves what the world is all about and how to conduct our lives. How to balance these two impulses, what power to give to either of them, will change with the individual, the age, and the culture. Lamm clearly enthrones the theonomous impulse; Kaplan, the autonomous.

But note well. A religious or philosophical position that stresses human autonomy, then, in no way implies the *rejection* of all law or of a sense of obligation. It does, however, insist that the authority for determining the nature and extent of the obligation lies within the human "self" ("autonomy"), within communities, not in some "other" authority ("heteronomy"), even in God ("theonomy").

But note also that the contrast is not that sharp. First of all, even Mordecai Kaplan would insist that the human self never operates purely autonomously; in the final analysis, it is God who is the source of our sense of obligation—not an independent Being beyond us, but God nevertheless, God as the power within us that impels us to bind ourselves to moral and spiritual values. Second, even a traditionalist would acknowledge that the doctrine of the Oral Torah allows the community and its authorities considerable scope in determining the precise legal implications of the biblical text. In fact, Deuteronomy 17:8–13 urges the community to bring its disputes to the magistrates who are "in charge at the time," and their judgments are to be followed meticulously. The tension between the two impulses is present in the full range of the positions, however differently it may be resolved in each case.

The issue, then, is most emphatically not the very legitimacy of a religious or specifically Jewish sense of being obligated. Nor is it the legitimacy of behavioral obligations in the first place. What is at issue are the respective roles of God and human beings in grounding that sense of obligation and in shaping the specific content of what we are obligated, as Jews, to do. If modernity has wrought a single, decisive transformation in the terms of this discussion, it is the insistence not that we be free from religious obligation, but that we take the authority on ourselves, or more accurately, that we share the authority with God, for we perceive God as having shared His authority with Israel. Of course, with authority comes the obligation to care, to study, and to think seriously about the issues. Most important, authority brings a far greater share of the responsibility for what we do and don't do as Jews.