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Ishmael and Moses: Everything Is Foreseen or Freedom Is Given?

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The story of the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21) and the story of the discovery and adoption of Moses (Exodus 2) appear at first glance to have little in common. The expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael unfolds within the confines of a small family, and after this episode, Ishmael does not play a major role in the biblical narrative. In contrast, the adoption of Moses sets the stage for the eventual redemption of Israel from slavery in Egypt, which serves as the foundation of the Torah and the entirety of Jewish history. However, a closer look at the verses in each story reveals many parallels, suggesting deliberate and significant lessons.

Comparison of Verses

To illuminate the parallels between the two stories, I will present a comparison of key verses from each chapter. Due to the differing structures of these narratives, the corresponding verses do not always align in sequence. Therefore, I will organize the comparisons following the sequence found in the Exodus story.

Genesis 21:11 The matter was exceedingly bad in Abraham's eyes because of his son.

Exodus 2:2 The woman conceived and bore a son. She saw that he was good, and she hid him for three months.

In both stories, each parent saw their son as "good" (or "bad" to harm), but circumstances beyond their control forced them to abandon their child.

Genesis 21:15 When the water in the skin was finished, she cast the child under one of the bushes.

Exodus 2:3 When she could not hide him longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile.

Both Jochebed and Hagar arrived at a point where they could no longer care for their child. Although they derive from different Hebrew roots, the phrases "was finished" (וַיִּכְלוּ) and "could [not]" (יָכְלָה) appear to be homonymic.

Ibn Ezra on Exodus 2:3 writes that the motivation of both mothers was the same: "Jochebed did this 'for she said: Let me not see the death of the child' [quoting Hagar in Genesis 21:16]." Neither could bear to see their child suffer.

Both mothers placed their child in vegetation (a bush and reeds) to protect them. In this case, the parallels are in essence a mirror: Ishmael was at risk from not having enough water, and Moses was placed in the ark to protect him from an abundance of water.

Genesis 21:16-17 And she went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she said, "Let me not see the death of the child." And she sat opposite him and lifted up her voice and wept. God heard the cry of the lad…

Exodus 2:4 And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to know what would happen to him.

Both Hagar and Miriam distanced themselves from the child. Hagar distanced herself to avoid seeing what would happen. She got as far away as she needed to be. Miriam also distanced herself, but for the opposite reason. She only went as far away as necessary to continue to watch. This raises the question of Jochebed's location. Presumably, she was further away, like Hagar.

After the mothers of the children had distanced themselves, there was someone else paying attention to the vulnerable child: God noticed Ishmael, and Miriam observed Moses.

Genesis 21:9 Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had born to Abraham, laughing.

Exodus 2:5 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She saw the basket among the reeds…

Sarah, in her anger, saw the son of Hagar, not even acknowledging his name Ishmael. She demanded that he and Hagar be cast out. In contrast, the daughter of Pharaoh, despite her father's anger at the Hebrews, saw a helpless baby and rescued him.

Genesis 21:10 She said to Abraham: Expel this slave-woman and her son…

Genesis 21:13 …And he sent her away. She went off and roamed in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

Exodus 2:5 … and she sent her slave-woman, and she took it.

Both stories have a slave-woman being sent. Sarah demands that Abraham expel (גרש) Hagar, but in the end, Abraham uses the milder שלח*—send out. But even with this less aggressive verb, Hagar and Ishmael get lost in the wilderness.*

Pharaoh's daughter also sent her slave-woman, but in this story, it was to rescue the child, not to abandon him. In this, she parallels the angel who rescued Ishmael.

Genesis 21:19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water…

Exodus 2:6 She opened it and saw the child…

Both rescues include opening[1] *and seeing.*

Genesis 21:17 …for God has heard the cry of the lad there where he is.

Exodus 2:6 …and behold a lad was crying. She took pity on it, and she said, "This is one of the children of the Hebrews."

In both verses, the crying children are referred to as na'ar—"lad."[2] *At this point in their respective stories, neither boy is named. They are simply called "son," "child," or "lad." Although Ishmael is named earlier in Genesis (16:11), he is not referred to by his name here. Similarly, Moses receives his name later in the narrative (Exodus 2:10), remaining nameless at the beginning.*

The lack of names emphasizes that their identities are secondary to their immediate need for compassion. These crying children are judged based on their current plight, not their future roles. As Rashi comments on Genesis 21:17,[3] *"He is to be judged according to his present deeds, not by what he may do in the future."*

Despite the current tensions between Egyptians and Hebrews in the Exodus narrative, or the future conflicts between the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael foreshadowed in Genesis, the narrative focuses on the immediate, vulnerable state of the children. At this moment, they must be saved.

Genesis 21:17 …an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven…

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[1] In the Genesis story the verb is פקח; in the Exodus story, it is פתח. Both mean "to open."

[2] This is surprising, since Moses was an infant, and *na'ar* generally refers to an older child. Perhaps this is related to the verb נער also meaning "to bray, roar" (see Jeremiah 51:38) and is therefore associated with him crying out.

[3] Quoting *Rosh Hashanah* 16b.

Exodus 2:8 …So the girl went and called the child's mother.

Both mothers are called. God sends His angel to call Hagar, while Pharaoh's daughter sends Miriam to call Jochebed. Both mothers now know that their child is safe and then reunite with them.

In summary, we have identified many parallels between the two stories. The differences between them also act as a mirror, further highlighting their connections. Perhaps the most significant mirror regards the issue of parentage: Ishmael's biological mother is Hagar, the Egyptian, and his surrogate mother is Sarah, the Hebrew. In contrast, Jochebed, the Hebrew, is the biological mother of Moses, and Pharaoh's daughter, the Egyptian, is his adoptive mother.

This final parallel suggests that the culture or nation from which they come is not important. Both Ishmael and Moses are rejected by figures of authority in the nations of their birth. Ishmael is rejected by Sarah, the matriarch of Abraham's Hebrew household. Moses is rejected by Pharaoh, the king of the Egyptians.

These stories, therefore, are not about the inherent nature of either nation. They do not convey a simple message of Hebrews being good and Egyptians being bad. The narratives are too complex for such simplistic dichotomies. The lesson taught is that all people are responsible for their actions, regardless of their national background.

Passive Versus Active?

I am not the first to notice some of the linguistic parallels between these stories. Scholars such as R. Amnon Bazak, R. Yisrael Meir Lau, and R. Meir Nehorai have discussed them previously. A common theme in their analyses is the claim that Hagar was passive in her story, whereas Miriam was active in the Moses narrative. They point out that in Genesis, it was the adult Hagar who was crying,[4] whereas in Exodus, the baby Moses was the one crying. They assert that Moses's family wasn't crying because they had not despaired.

However, while Miriam is certainly more active than Hagar, she isn't the mother—Jochebed is. According to Ibn Ezra's interpretation, Jochebed acted with motivations similar to Hagar and was therefore also passive. A well-known Talmudic passage depicts Miriam arguing that her father's decision to divorce Jochebed was harsher than Pharaoh's decree, as it would prevent all children from being born. Moved by her words, Amram remarries Jochebed, and other Israelites follow his example.[5] This *midrash* underscores how the Sages recognized that Miriam was more active than her parents. Referring to "the family of Moses" blurs this important distinction.

[4] In Genesis 21:16, Hagar is crying, using the verb בכה. In 21:17, God hears the cry of the boy, but it is described using the noun *kol*, literally "voice."

[5] *Sotah* 12a.

Pharaoh's daughter could have also remained passive, not recognizing or rescuing the baby. But just as Moses later recognized the unusual state of the burning bush, she paid attention to her surroundings. Like God and the angel who rescued Ishmael, she took action to save the baby in the basket.

R. Bazak notes that in the Genesis story, Hagar and Ishmael needed miraculous intervention, while in the Exodus story, the rescue is performed by humans. For him, this signifies the active stance of Moses's family. However, the parallels we have seen above indicate that both Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter are analogous to God and the angel in the Genesis story. Their actions reflect their divine nature. Even when seemingly distant, Miriam, like God, is much closer than she might appear.

Freedom Is Given

One lesson from comparing these two stories is to avoid despair and resignation, as Hagar and Jochebed did, and instead to remain active and persevere, like Miriam.

However, there is another lesson. In recent years, there has been much discussion about the lack of human free will. For example, Robert Sapolsky, in his recent book *Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will*, argues that we are entirely a product of our biology and environment, leaving no room for free will. As he writes, "[W]e are nothing more or less than the cumulative biological and environmental luck, over which we had no control, that has brought us to any moment."[6]

Following this approach, one might assume that an Egyptian, especially the daughter of the cruel Pharaoh, would be "destined" to share her father's disdain for the helpless and certainly would not show compassion for a Hebrew enemy. At a minimum, she would remain passive and accept this as the way of the world.

Yet, the parallels between Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter and the rescuers of Ishmael demonstrate that we are not merely advanced animals with additional intelligence; we possess an element of the divine.

A number of years before the publication of *Determined*, Sapolsky was interviewed on an episode of the radio program and podcast *This American Life*.[7] He presented many of the arguments that would later appear in his book. The interviewer also spoke with Harvard professor Melissa Franklin, who agreed with Sapolsky, acknowledging that "there's no evidence that we have free will." Curiously, she cited a conversation

[6] Robert Sapolsky, *Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will* (Penguin, 2023), 4.

[7] David Kestenbaum, host, *This American Life*, podcast, episode 662, "Where There Is a Will," act II, "Life Is a Coin with One Side," WBEZ Chicago, November 16, 2018, https://www.thisamericanlife.org/662/where-there-is-a-will.

with colleagues on the topic. One colleague suggested that "there could be some complex thing that comes in that actually gives us free will." Another responded, "You're talking about magic or God. Just say it out loud—magic or God." Franklin could not accept those options and maintained that humans are machines, lacking free will.

The debate over whether or not humans have free will is not new to Judaism. Rabbi Akiva in *Pirkei Avot* 3:15 declared that "Everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is granted." Maimonides made free will a central component of his philosophy.[8]

Support for this approach goes back much further. It is essentially the philosophical bedrock of the Torah itself. The Torah demands justice, and justice only has validity if those called to pursue it have free will. True, animals do not have free will. No one litigates against a wolf for assaulting a sheep. But humans were created in the image of God. That divinity makes them unique from other creatures and expresses itself in free will. Judaism proudly says out loud, "We're talking about God" (magic is not part of the equation).

Acting in a divine manner, Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter exercised their free will. Despite all the reasons—biology, self-preservation, culture, environment—that might have led them to do otherwise, they chose to save the baby.

Particularly surprising were the choices of Pharaoh's daughter. Her actions set into motion the process that ultimately led to the liberation of the Hebrews. This was possible because she had the courage to see the baby for what he was at that moment—deserving of compassion—not merely as the condemned child of a slave. That choice changed everything.

This demonstrates that even nations are not destined to bear unchanging attitudes. While Egypt treated Israel cruelly, there was a time when they were kinder, and there is an obligation to recall that kindness: "You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land" (Deuteronomy 23:8). This instills hope that despite their behavior in the present, nations can choose to act better once again in the future.

Ought Judaism Be Tinkered With?

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Book Review of Miri Freud-Kandel, *Louis Jacobs and the Quest for a Contemporary Jewish Theology* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2023)

There are three pitfalls to be avoided by Jewish Apologetics in its attempt to grapple with the problems raised by modern thought. It must not

[8] *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah* 5; *The Guide for the Perplexed* 3:17; *Shemonah Perakim* 8.

refuse to recognise the existence of the problem by rejecting, in the name of tradition, modern thought and all its ways as of the devil. It must not encourage that division of the mind in which incompatible ideas are allowed to exist side by side in water-tight compartments. Nor must it be desperately stampeded into postulating an artificial synthesis, a queer hybrid faith which both the adherents of traditional Judaism and representative modern thinkers would repudiate. A true Jewish Apologetic, eschewing obscurantism, religious schizophrenia, and intellectual dishonesty, will be based on the conviction that all truth, 'the seal of the Holy One, blessed is He,' is one, and that a synthesis is possible between the permanent values and truth of tradition and the best thought of the day.

- Louis Jacobs, *We Have Reason to Believe* (1957)[1]

Louis Jacobs penned what would become his most infamous book with a simple goal in mind: to help religious Jews "be sure that their faith is no vague emotion but is grounded in reality… to be in the position of confidently asserting: 'We have *reason* to believe.'"[2] Readers would be stimulated to "think seriously about their faith"[3] in an effort to inspire that affirmation. 40 years later, however, Jacobs made a stunning admission:

> I do not delude myself into imagining that I have arrived at my position by pure theological reflection, and doubt whether anyone else really arrives at his or her religious stance on these grounds. Other factors—emotional, sociological, experiential—than the cognitive are involved in religious belief.[4]

Miri Freud-Kandel notes in her recent book, *Louis Jacobs and the Quest for a Contemporary Jewish Theology*, that Jacobs "was personally adept at performing the intellectual juggling that his theology required" but that "in the absence of his rather particular experiences and beliefs, embracing his model is far from straightforward" (6).[5]

Does this mean that today's religious seekers have nothing to learn from Louis Jacobs? To the contrary! If Freud-Kandel is correct in defining Jewish theology as "a quest to discover how religious beliefs can retain meaning and exert a lasting hold on the believer, identifying the means

[1] Louis Jacobs, *We Have Reason to Believe*, 5th ed. (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2007), 9.

[2] Ibid., 10.

[3] Ibid., 12.

[4] Louis Jacobs, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), 237.

[5] All in-text citations are from Freud-Kandel's book.

of living a God-oriented life" (9), then Jacobs's methodology may well have much to offer even if his particular conclusions are found to be lacking.[6] This may be especially so in conversation with our "burgeoning understanding of how all knowledge is shaped by the contexts out of which it grows."[7]

The question to explore, then, is what exactly these approaches that adapt Jacobs's methodology without accepting his conclusions can/should look like in practice. Importantly, this review is **not** a reappraisal of Jacobs but an analysis of Freud-Kandel's approach, which is a continuation of Jacobs's project but distinct from his particular approach.[8]

One of the earliest self-articulations of Jacobs's broader approach is found in a 1944 letter sent to the *Jewish Chronicle*, invoking language from *Alice in Wonderland*:

> [W]e may say that the English Yeshivas provide the Cheshire cat without its cheerful grin. Jews' College provides the grin without the cat. The time is surely ripe for a new institution, one that will combine the deep piety and love of *Torah Lishmoh* [Torah study for its own sake] of the Yeshiva with the polish, the modern methods, and the efficiency of Jews' College.

Freud-Kandel writes that this Cheshire-Cat model "evokes an ideal that brings together two distinct approaches" and "has the potential to create something that is strengthened by simultaneously

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[6] Cosgrove closes his dissertation with a call to study Jacobs's writings precisely because there is so much to learn from him today:

> In framing faith as the quest of an individual Jew through the riches of tradition towards a forever elusive truth, Jacobs formulated a theology that is both empowering and filled with humility. If indeed, "the search for Torah is Torah itself," then Jewish inquiry, observance and prayer become a series of opportunities for discovery—of the self, of others, and of an unknowable God. Such a quest, directed both towards tradition and the heavens, acknowledges that every Jew exists at a different point on their search, all the while joined in a common cause. In an age increasingly polarized between the alternatives of secularism and fundamentalism, a quest-driven faith further enables one to affirm belief while respecting the integrity of another's faith. By dint of his engagement with tradition, fierce intellectual integrity and constant encouragement regarding the individual quests of the Jews in his midst, Jacobs's work is instructive, if not required, reading for those wishing to participate in future discussions in constructive Jewish theology.

[7] A work which highlights how this is the case is Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg's *Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2017).

[8] Jacobs's biography and the particular details of this theology will not be addressed here. Interested readers may find much of interest in my previous *Lehrhaus* article about Jacobs on those fronts. For an implicit (though not explicit) contemporary use of Jacobs's quest model, see my *Lehrhaus* review of Rabbi Dr. Raphael Zarum's *Questioning Belief*.

falling outside and between two seemingly conflicting positions" (30). This foreshadows the future perception of Jacobs and his supporters striving for middle grounds between the extremes that otherwise dominated Anglo Jewry.[9]

Freud-Kandel notes, however, that Jacobs's ultimate theology "struggled to set out a positive account of the commanded status of the *mitsvot*" but nonetheless attempted to center "the belief that God revealed the Torah for Israel to uphold" (211). Due to Jacobs's precise theology being hard to make heads or tails of by all but he himself, Freud-Kandel points out that his early Cheshire-Cat analogy may have been too on the nose:

> The Cheshire-Cat in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* offers useful and important guidance to Alice as she tries to navigate the strange world she encounters. He even seems to occupy a position of authority, from his perch above Alice in a tree. Yet he is not a guide that she can pin down: he appears and disappears as he chooses, he lacks substance, and seems at times to be not much more than a mirage. (211-212)

It is for that reason that Freud-Kandel takes on a framing that Jacobs himself did not—and likely never would—use: a "tinkering" model which "encourages the individual to find a Judaism that can make sense to them" regardless of how aligned it is with Jacobs or how the tinkerers in question actually come to reach their conclusions (212). The theological ends, one might say, justify the individual means.

Freud-Kandel argues that encouraging tinkering with one's Judaism is needed in the post-secular world where binary distinctions between religious and secular are being broken down. This offers "the possibility for a theological voice to re-emerge and be reclaimed" while acknowledging that all religious voices are "just one voice among many, with no single position enjoying the right to express certainty for its claims to truth" (216).[10]

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[9] In Harry Freedman's words, "Jacobs's choice of path was that of the middle way. Between tradition and modernity, Englishness and Jewishness, reason and belief. It was a path from which he would never deviate." Harry Freedman, *Reason to Believe: The Controversial Life of Rabbi Louis Jacobs* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2021), 45.

[10] An interesting analysis of post-secularism from a non-Jewish perspective can be found in Justin Brierley's 2023 book, *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God: Why New Atheism Grew Old and Secular Thinkers Are Considering Christianity Again* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2023).

Freud-Kandel notes that a contributing factor to this global shift is the role of the internet and social media, which have transformed "how information is accessed, shared, and debated":

> The internet helps to extend the influence of the subjective turn and the wider challenge this directs at religious authority. By providing unlimited access to sources which provide alternative interpretations of religious teachings, it is easier to question the decisions of established leadership figures. It is also more straightforward to identify texts that justify individual choices. By disseminating

Reclaiming Jacobs's approach as a call for personal tinkering rather than an exact proposal works like this:

> The tinkerer is not a professional craftsman striving to create some ideal form: the challenges of achieving such a goal are willingly recognized. Rather, they make use of whatever tools are available to create some sort of model that works. This is the patchwork-quilt model of theology, which may not be especially pleasing in aesthetic terms but which serves its purpose. Applied to Jewish theology, when the ideas selected by the tinkerer are drawn from Jewish textual sources and there is a retained commitment to ritual practice, which requires a community context for expression, the building blocks for a religiously observant quest begin to emerge. This carves out a space for questioning, recognizing the altered intellectual and sociocultural context in which the search for religious meaning is being undertaken, but it simultaneously grounds the search within a committed form of Judaism. (221-222)

Embarking on this search, or "quest" to use Jacobs's language, "encourages individuals not to shy away from raising questions about faith." This quest "builds on the premise that individuals must take responsibility for studying the sources, engaging with Judaism in order to develop a personal theology that helps establish a commitment to faith." So long as such individuals remain firmly within the framework of *mitzvot* and maintain a connection with the Jewish community, they "can explore their own challenges while remaining anchored in Jewish teachings" (258).

Perhaps the most obvious immediate critique of Freud-Kandel's approach is that it is not very Orthodox. In fact, it sounds a lot like Reform Judaism's fundamental idea of "participating in traditions and rituals that are meaningful to us and by-passing on others" in order to provide adherents with "an endless variety of ways to connect with Judaism."

Such pushback likely wouldn't bother Freud-Kandel much, though. Jacobs himself acknowledged later in life that his views would never have been able to mature further had he remained within Orthodoxy. Freud-Kandel proposes that, for many of today's most passionate seekers, "the tyranny of denominational labels has become an inconvenience, imposed from above without

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these ideas over the internet, like-minded thinkers can come together and understand that they are not alone. (222)

regard for the different religious quests being pursued" (259). Like Jacobs, the best choice for these seekers may be to abandon the denominational labels game and simply follow their quest wherever it leads them. Freud-Kandel notes that this is a relatively easy choice for them, as an increasing number of young Jews perceive denominational institutions as too "inward-looking, keen to draw boundaries, and selfishly focused on their own members." Denominational affiliation, for them, is "unimportant." Such individuals certainly "seek knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of Jewish thought," but they simply "are not especially concerned about where on the religious spectrum the institutions offering these opportunities are located" (276).

On a descriptive level, this is certainly true of many. Professor Roberta Rosenthal Kwall writes of many examples of this in her book, *Remix Judaism*, and notes that "there is much to suggest that American Jews are entering into a post-denominational phase, with the divisions grouped along the lines of 'traditional versus liberal' rather than according to specific denominational affiliations."[11] Professor Tamar Ross calls this trend "playlist Judaism" in that "just as people now curate their own idiosyncratic collections of music rather than buying whole albums, so too do an increasing number of Jews insist upon 'à la carte' Jewish experience, without buying into neatly prepackaged denominational identities."[12] Kwall's research focuses on how this reality is conducive to Jews all along the spectrum individually "remixing" their Jewish practices in ways that are personally meaningful even if not technically halakhic via a process of "selection, rejection, and modification."[13] In her words,

> It is possible for individuals to find an authentic yet personal meaning in tradition when three conditions exist: (1) people exercise individuality as to what rituals and traditions they elect to incorporate in their lives; (2) people infuse the elements they choose with their own personal meaning; and (3) people *consistently* perform the elements they practice in a way that embraces, at least to *some degree*, the authenticity of historical tradition. If these conditions are met, it is highly likely that both the individuals and the communities of which they are a part will be successful in transmitting meaningful, specific elements of Jewish tradition as well

[11] Roberta Rosenthal Kwall, *Remix Judaism: Preserving Tradition in a Diverse World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 204.

[12] Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism*, 2nd ed. (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2021), 272-273.

[13] I reviewed Kwall's book here.

> as a more global appreciation for its beauty and relevance. The key is selecting practices that retain an authentic link to Jewish history and community, infusing them with a sense of personal meaning, and consistent performance.[14]

Interestingly, Kwall completely separates the remixing of Jewish practice from trends in Jewish theology with a note that "faith and observance do not necessarily go hand in hand" and that "in practice the Jewish religion tends to focus on actions rather than belief."[15] Nevertheless, there are obvious parallels between Kwall's and Freud-Kandel's projects. One might contend that they represent the same project, with Freud-Kandel adding a theological element to the remix process. The two then work together in articulating a complete Jewish quest from one point on the religious spectrum to another.[16]

Of course, such developments are unwelcome to those who believe that their own particular approach to Judaism is *the* correct one. For them, Freud-Kandel notes that "the value of external sources of authority that are beyond questioning and which claim to build on objective, transcendent accounts of truth has been strongly reasserted" in response to such moves away from denominationalism. For them, "[s]ubmission to a higher authority is deemed a worthwhile price to pay for the sense of some type of certainty it can claim to offer," and Freud-Kandel is quick to add that "this approach still represents a choice in the spiritual marketplace" rather than being truly compulsory (291).

Freud-Kandel may write off such communities as those who simply choose to live under the tyranny of denominationalism, but one must ask if there is perhaps something to that desire for objective truth? One might attempt to make a philosophical argument to prove that Orthodoxy is the only authentic Jewish path from first principles and up, but a case can also be made using Freud-Kandel's own assumptions. Let's first examine her preferred model of religious authority:

> While some prefer unquestioned authority based on notions of absolute truth, which encourages a focus on boundary markers and stringent practices, others emphasize the availability of alternative grounds for faith. In the more flexible models, which use the variety in the Jewish sources to be more creative in halakhic interpretation, a framework is developed for cultivating religious authority in terms of influence rather than of imposed control. In this model—which in certain

[14] Kwall, 12-13.

[15] Ibid., 4.

[16] While Freud-Kandel may argue that theological tinkering need not lead to changes in Jewish practice, Jacobs's own writings disagree, as we will see below.

> respects builds on a consciousness of the destruction wrought in the name of modernism—as in the underlying concept of the quest, if an individual is committed to seeking faith, absolute truth need not be required for acceptance of religious authority. The key driver is the perspective of the individual and their willingness to accept the religious teachings. (318)[17]

This formulation returns more directly to Jacobs, though perhaps not in the way that Freud-Kandel would prefer. In *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, Jacobs acknowledged the uncomfortable fact that "psychologically, it is undeniable that a clear recognition of the human development of Jewish practice and observance is bound to produce a somewhat weaker sense of allegiance to the minutiae of Jewish law." [18] He further acknowledged that a religious non-fundamentalist of the type he sought to cultivate "might feel free to depart from the halakhah in his personal life" due to the understanding of Judaism they come to[19] and ultimately concluded that "[o]nce one acknowledges that all Jewish institutions have had a history, which we can now trace to a large extent, one is entitled—I would say duty-bound—to be selective in determining which practices are binding, because of their value for Jewish religious life today, and which have little or no value."[20]

Refreshingly, Freud-Kandel is not oblivious to the fact that her model "runs the risk, by prioritizing the self, of anointing the individual as the final arbiter of truth, thereby subverting the form of life that Judaism seeks to nurture" and that embarking on the quest she recommends "encourages a questioning of external sources of authority and the imposition of duties from above to assert the precedence of the personal." Her response is to argue that "if the nature of the quest involves an individual trying to find the means to sustain a life of Jewish faith, the religious framework of ritual, learning, and community can foster an appreciation of Jewish teachings, concretizing the fleeting experiences of wonder and encounters with transcendence that individuals can seek for themselves" (335).

How, then, does one escape the risks associated with personal autonomy in religious decision-making? By having a prior commitment to the Jewish tradition. Freud-Kandel's ideal tinkerers are not even in the category that Sam Lebens has

[17] This approach is not meant to be purely intellectual. In Freud-Kandel's words, "Jacobs emphasized how, when engaged with seriously, Judaism requires more than an intellectual assent to a set of clearly delineated theories. Accounts of religion that prioritize the intellect, and in the process marginalize other aspects the individual may bring to religious experience, create their own limited picture… He emphasized the role of emotions alongside intellect; experience alongside belief; mind alongside body. This also fits with contemporary challenges to the sharp distinction between the religious and the secular" (324).

[18] Jacobs, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, 53.

[19] Ibid., 128-129.

[20] Ibid., 240.

called the "Jewish undecided"—those who identify as Jewish but are "undecided about how religiously observant they should be."[21] Freud-Kandel's tinkerers have already made the decision to live as informed, observant Jews in a similar way to Jacobs in order to maintain full commitment to a recognizable form of halakhic Judaism. Such people can even go so far as to reject the notion of objective truth completely and would still be observant because they have already committed themselves to such a lifestyle.[22] Freud-Kandel even says this explicitly, writing that "it can be legitimate to fear that questioning truth can lead to a descent into relativism" but that since "the limits of cognition have been recognized, a search for absolute truth can function as a limiting factor, reducing the entry points to a life of faith." Ultimately, then, it is only "[w]ith a willingness to observe rituals and study the sources within the framework of Jewish community life [that] the structure of Judaism can be maintained, and the opportunities for religious encounter can be nurtured." This may "be challenging when viewed from the dominant perspective in much of Orthodox Judaism," but Freud-Kandel argues that the benefits outweigh the potential costs (337).[23]

This approach is not as alien to the Orthodox world as one might imagine. Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Rav Shagar) expressed a

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[21] Samuel Lebens, *A Guide for the Jewish Undecided: A Philosopher Makes the Case for Orthodox Judaism* (New York: Yeshiva University Press and Maggid Books, 2022), 65.

[22] While this sounds like advocating for "Orthopraxy" or "Social Orthodoxy," I believe Freud-Kandel is actually arguing for something different. Unlike the Orthoprax or Socially Orthodox, Freud-Kandel considers theology essential to the Jewish quest. Playing on how Rabbi Dr. Neil Gillman wrote about Halakhah, I would argue that Freud-Kandel's framework requires her tinkerers to embrace *a* theology even if not *the* theology.

[23] Conservative *posek* Rabbi Joel Roth serves as a model of such theological tinkering while maintaining an a-priori commitment to Halakhah. In his words,

> If authentic Judaism is halakhic, as I have argued, then the absolute centrality of *halakhah* to authentic Judaism is the "given" and not the "to be proved!" The absolute centrality of *halakhah* is the axiom of authentic Judaism, and axioms need not be proved precisely because they are presumed to be correct…
>
> In this construct, theology is without a doubt the handmaiden of *halakhah*. And this is what that means: Since *halakhah* is the "given," theology cannot undermine its "given-ness" and remain an authentic theology. Does this imply that there is such a thing as an authentic theology, intimating that there is also such a thing as an inauthentic theology? Yes, it absolutely does. The purpose of the authentic theology is to provide the "myth" which rationalizes and defends *halakhah* as the given of authentic Judaism. And since the acceptance of Torah as the "constitution" of the halakhic system is critical to understanding how the halakhic system works, it must follow that a primary job of an authentic theology is to supply the myth/myths which does/do that. (Joel Roth, *Hakol Kol Yaakov: Response and Halakhic Essays* [Jerusalem: The Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2023], 16-17)

Roth later acknowledges that the theology which works to undergird his personal commitment to Halakhah works for him but may not work for others. "For those for whom it does not work," he writes, "the challenge is to devise their own *aggadah*/theology/myth, so long as it allows the Conservative Movement validly to continue to claim itself as a halakhic movement, writing the next chapter in the book of *halakhah*, not a new book" (ibid., 48).

similar idea, recently translated in a new volume. In his words, "faith is a remainder, a psycho-theological symptom manifesting as inexplicable stubbornness. It is a willingness to be on the losing side of the world simply because 'this is who I am and this is who I want to be,' without conscious justification." [24] Within such a framework, one "does not accept the commandments based on some understanding, but rather because of an intentional decision that constitutes passionate commitment and sacrifice." [25] Indeed, "faith… justifies itself only if you already believe." [26] As summarized by Alan Brill, Rav Shagar was of the opinion that "someone who requires justification of the tradition is already outside of it because tradition, according to its own definition, is a function of self-identity and self-definition, which is composed and sustained by experience" and felt that "we construct our world of Torah by means of personal commitment, creativity, and finding meaning."[27] For Rav Shagar, like for Freud-Kandel, the decision to be halakhically observant precedes any cognitive justification of such a choice. Shagar elsewhere referred to this as an inherent sense of "rootedness" to Judaism.

Isn't it problematic to offer an approach to contemporary seekers but limit it only to those who have already made up their minds about how to live? Freud-Kandel argues otherwise:

> The impossibility—and really the undesirability—of constructing a single account of Judaism that could appeal to all Jews is one of the challenges for Jewish theology: how to construct an account of Jewish teachings that can be transmissible. The value of theology is constrained when it is wholly personal. Jacobs understood that Jewish theology was designed to balance the personal with received teachings, securing continuity with the past in ways that can be transmitted into the future. Implicit here is his understanding that theology's task is not to bring unbelievers to faith: its goal is not to construct philosophically defensible accounts of Jewish beliefs but to lay out the terms that can help believers to reflect on and appreciate their faith. Approached in these terms, Jewish theology starts with the sources. It entails scouring Jewish texts to find accounts that can resonate with individuals and draw them closer to their faith. (340)

Freud-Kandel's project, then, is not so much one

[24] Rabbi Shagar, *Living Time: Festival Discourses for the Present Age* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2024), 123.

[25] Ibid., 98.

[26] Ibid., 64.

[27] Ibid., xix.

of theology as much as one of apologetics—supporting the faith of believers who may be faltering rather than attempting to evangelize non-believers. And while many readers may find that anti-climactic, such a move is consistent with Jacobs as well (refer to the opening quote of this review, which was the paragraph and, arguably, the mission statement of *We Have Reason to Believe*).

With such a select audience, then, perhaps there truly is little to worry about. The perpetual "danger of a descent into relativism, creating wholly individual versions of faith severed from their religious roots" is mitigated significantly by the fact that the quest cannot start until there is already "an initial primary commitment to Judaism, to seeking religious answers or a sense of divine command within Jewish teachings" (340-341). Embarking on the quest only after ruling out antinomianism (perhaps also ruling out heterodoxy) defends the project as a whole.

One might find a parallel to this in an infamous debate relevant to Modern Orthodoxy. Writing in the *Torah U-Madda Journal*'s inaugural issue, Rabbi Yehuda Parnes argued that "Torah u-Madda can only be viable if it imposes strict limits on freedom of inquiry in areas that may undermine [Rambam's 13 Principles of Faith]." In response to Parnes, Professors Lawrence Kaplan and David Berger wrote that "to artificially limit serious intellectual inquiry where the person is properly prepared, even if such inquiry involves reading works of heresy, is to stultify an individual's religious growth." They even went so far as to write, "The frontiers of the faith have been established by the weighing of ideas that carry the potential of heresy."

Rabbi Shalom Carmy, in his own response to Parnes, went even further:

> Many factors go into the formulation and execution of an educational program for the individual, for groups of individuals, for the community as a whole. One factor, not the least important, is the place, if any, to be accorded to studies that introduce thoughts of *kefirah*. Rabbis Kaplan and Berger offer impressive illustrations of the manner in which these studies have enriched some of the most profound and most enduring works of Torah, as was freely acknowledged by masters like the Rambam and, may God grant him life and health, *maran ha-Rav* Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Many lesser individuals can attest to the value of their liberal arts studies for the attainment of greater insight into Torah. We would also do well to recognize the need for broad knowledge and understanding of human culture in the service of our love for other Jews and even for mankind.

> Furthermore, we must never overlook the fact that, as participants in the modern world, we are affected by it, be it consciously or unwittingly. Our brief excursion into the history of ideas highlighted the powerful attraction of the illusion that man can take up an observation post above, and independent of, his or her prior experience and beliefs. We ought not to indulge our absent-mindedness to the point where we forget that this applies to us too. There is no "view from nowhere." Yet God has granted us free will. We need not remain captives of the unpropitious spiritual climate in which we find ourselves implicated; but, in order to free ourselves, we must shrewdly map out the terrain from which, and over which, we intend to make our escape. In other words: in order to undertake the slow, unending task of reviewing, revising and elevating our thoughts and feelings we must know from whence we come and where we are to make our way. As Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein has observed, the *apikoros*, whom we are instructed to rebut, as often as not, is the "*apikoros* within."

Modern Orthodoxy's definitive rebuttal of Parnes's calls for limitation on freedom of inquiry in pursuit of religious truth seems to settle the matter in favor of Freud-Kandel. Provided one is properly prepared to embark on the perilous quest, there is not much room to argue in principle with the theological tinkering that she recommends to her readers from a Modern Orthodox perspective.[28] Indeed, rethinking of Jewish faith as a perpetual quest is already a framing being used more often in Modern Orthodox works, such as Rabbi Dr. Raphael Zarum's *Questioning Belief*.[29]

Modern Orthodox critique, instead, should perhaps come from utilizing Jacobs as the explicit theological model. One can easily imagine Freud-Kandel's book being written with the same arguments made but with no reference to Jacobs as the religious personality to emulate. The fact that the book is crouched in Jacobs's particular life and theology implies that prospective tinkerers are not only encouraged to come up with a theology that ensures their Orthopraxy but also to continue moving just as Jacobs did into more heterodox streams of Judaism if it is where their conclusions point.

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[28] Freud-Kandel explicitly celebrates platforms like www.thetorah.com and laments how Orthodoxy's "concerted efforts to keep engagement with more recent intellectual currents outside the religious enclave" present "notable limits to the influence of the new quest on Jewish life" (215-216). From the perspective just outlined, her lament seems to be justified. *Torah U-Madda*'s support for freedom of inquiry should theoretically apply even to such websites even if Modern Orthodox Jews (rightly) vehemently disagree with the views presented.

[29] Raphael Zarum, *Questioning Belief: Torah and Tradition in an Age of Doubt* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2023).

We might, then, conclude as follows: Orthodox Judaism disagrees with Jacobs's particular views on particular subjects and ought not to support religious seekers moving in the same directions. There is, however, great benefit in sharing the language of Judaism as a lifelong quest and in allowing those who are actively committed to staying within the fold to "tinker" as needed to keep themselves theologically afloat and otherwise within the Orthodox community. This is especially true if such tinkerers only wish to be "Jews in the pews" and have no intention of leading congregations.[30] As Freud-Kandel writes,

> A tinkering theology offers a methodology for identifying an abiding sense of command within Jewish teachings by recognizing the power of ritual to foment a consciousness of God. Ritual can thereby be imbued with a compelling authority, not imposed by religious leaders asserting control but as something willingly embraced within the covenantal community by seekers pursuing a contemporary Jewish quest. While somewhat different from Jacobs' approach, what I have tried to explain is how this can enable Jewish teachings to retain their abiding potential to function, one way or another, as ladders to heaven. (348)

Thank you to Dr. Miri Freud-Kandel for graciously sending me a copy of the book, to Rabbi David Fried for editing, and to Ashley Stern Mintz for copyediting this review.

Dance Lessons for Jews

Baruch November's full-length book of poems is entitled Bar Mitzvah Dreams.

The Pop-Up Rave of Jerusalem

August burns white hot.
The street—whose name
means the son of Judah—slopes
downward to Yaffo Street,
but the dancers don't mind.

They dance till inseparable,
till they don't feel the heat
and become the heat,
till their skin turns
a greater shade of tan,
till they believe they're not
of this lower world.

[30] In a discussion with Rabbi Aryeh Klapper about the limits of Orthodox theology, Rabbi Francis Nataf suggests that the question "what must a Jew believe?" is a much less important one than "what must a rabbi believe?" The audio can be found on Nataf's website, split into two parts.

Israelis and tourists
in taut clothing
spin—their shekels
flying out of pockets
to the black tiles of the street.
"What the hell is this?"
many who pass the gate ask
the bouncers in envy,

but it is too late—no room
behind the high fence
where sweat is exchanged
like a sweet commodity,

and bodies grind away
at their G-dly souls.

An Education

Sometimes you still have to
remind yourself you won't be

that teenager again,
in a Hebrew day school,

who painfully shied from the eye doctor's daughter
and was too serious

about reading Hawthorne and listening to Leonard Cohen
sing *from the other side of sorrow and despair*,

who became furious playing basketball
on the school's makeshift court:

sometimes when you shot, the ball did not
complee its arc, hitting the too-low

ceiling of possibilities
with the rasping sound

of a crude machine rejecting
everything it's fed.

You began to know then
what life is like—

exactly what
it should
not be.

Dance Lessons for Jews

Something about Chassidim
dancing makes Jews
feel more like Jews—

or like rejecting everything
mystical out of old fears
and leaving though
it's growing cold
out for Jews now.

Return is always possible
to the circles of deep believers

who may not relate dance
to the delicate art of dark swans.

One Talmudic master
was so renowned for wildly
dancing at weddings—swinging
twigs of myrtle above his head—
that others said he'd degraded
the reputation of scholars.

They'd missed the point:
his life had been elevated
with the joy of belief
beyond explanation.

An Event for Jewish Singles

Other people know how
to enjoy themselves.
I am a miserable guest,
especially at these parties
where spinning asteroids
collide or veer off
on their own: You know, lonely

Strangers attempting to meet
over terrible music,
but it turns into a couple hours
where I stare at my phone,
the cedar wood ceiling,
or pray against my self-
destruction.

Or I rewind the night
because I can in a poem
and stay home, listen
to the glowing horn
of Miles Davis, read
a mystical tract
about how much soul
actually needs body
and body needs soul.

I learn how G-d needs
even me, for nothing
could've been created
for the sake of nothing.

Baruch November's full-length book of poems is entitled Bar Mitzvah Dreams*. His collection of poems,* Dry Nectars of Plenty*, co-won* BigCityLit*'s chapbook contest. His works feature in* Tiferet Journal*,* Paterson Literary Review*,* Lumina*,* NewMyths.com*, and* The Forward*. His poem "After Esav" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Baruch hosts and organizes* The Jewish Poetry Reading Series *for the JCC of Buffalo. He teaches literature and writing at Touro University.*