



Devarim

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THE ODDS OF ORTHODOXY

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Book Review of Samuel Lebens, [*A Guide for the Jewish Undecided: A Philosopher Makes the Case for Orthodox Judaism*](#) (New Milford: Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 2022).

“If rabbinic Judaism has anything to say across its borders, it lies in how the voice of religion might be authoritative without being authoritarian, unifying without ceasing to be pluralist, and rational without lacking passion.”

-Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, Zt 1'

Rabbi Dr. Samuel Lebens concluded his most recent book by stating: “For the person rooted in the Jewish community, reality is calibrated such that the only reasonable course of action is to commit oneself to live by and continue to shape the unfolding Torah from Sinai.”² This claim, if true, has the potential to revolutionize Jewish discourse and pedagogy for the better.³

Lebens frames his argument as “Pascalberg’s wager,” a Jewish alternative to “Pascal’s wager”: If God exists and wants Jews to be Orthodox, then Jews can only receive eternal reward if they are observant of Halakhah. If, however, it turns out that God does not exist or does not care about human actions, then nothing is lost by living such a life.

Importantly, this wager addresses only those who

¹ Jonathan Sacks, ed., [*Tradition in an Untraditional Age: Essays on Modern Jewish Thought*](#) (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1990), 200.

² Lebens, 271.

³ Initial drafts of this review were over double the length of the current version. Anyone who wishes to see the arguments presented fleshed out in more depth is welcome to email me to receive an expanded version.

already cherish Judaism.⁴ In Lebens's words, "Pascalberg's audience are what we might call the Jewish undecided. They are certainly Jews, and they are committed to their identity. But they're undecided about how religiously observant they should be; or at least, they're open to reassessing how religiously observant they should be."⁵ For such an audience, Lebens claims, the only thinkable options are to commit to being a religious Jew or to live as a Jew who is not religious. All other options are what he calls "unthinkable" in that they will not be factored into the practical deliberations of a person who already feels rooted in the Jewish community.⁶

⁴ Whether this, or a similar, argument would be sufficient to move the "Jewish Disillusioned" as opposed to the undecided is not the subject of this review.

⁵ Lebens, 65.

⁶ One may perhaps accuse such a person of being closed-minded. After all, they are blocking off potentially legitimate lifestyle options for reasons that may be practically, but not necessarily epistemically, warranted. To this critique, Lebens responds by writing that

...Having epistemic roots doesn't entail closed-mindedness. Granted: it will take a lot more evidence to convince the Christian that Jesus was a liar, or to convince the Jew that Jesus was the messiah, than it might take to convince a neutral bystander. But so long as there is a threshold beyond which the evidence *would* make inroads, and undermine that loyalty, uprooting a person – and so long as people are willing to listen to other opinions and to gather that contrary evidence – then we cannot say that being rooted is straightforwardly closed-minded.

Furthermore, if a member of the Jewish community, for example, can justify her decision to *be* a member of her community, in terms of its contribution to her own flourishing, in just the way that she can justify her decision to enter into

It should be noted upfront, though, that being a religious Jew and being an Orthodox Jew are not necessarily the same. Other denominations of Judaism also consider themselves religious.⁷ Lebens must, then, do extra work to demonstrate a "case for Orthodox Judaism," as the *Guide's* subtitle promises.

Unfortunately, Lebens provides no working definition of Orthodoxy in this book. Elsewhere, Lebens defines it as the sum of three propositions, based on R. Yosef Albo's *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim*: One God created the world, revealed the Torah, and exercises divine providence.⁸ This definition is quite broad and allows for a very big tent of

friendships and loving relationships, rather than opting for the life of a hermit, then her demand for overwhelming evidence before she embraces Christianity – the unthinkability of Jesus being the messiah – is *rational* for her. Her steadfast refusal to believe that Jesus is the messiah is rational, either because the stakes are higher for her, or because her steadfastness is *practically* rational (irrespective of its epistemic merits). (Lebens, 44-45)

Put differently, people are not to blame for being in such a situation unless and until they're provided with an overwhelming amount of evidence to change their mind.

⁷ For Lebens, in the *Guide*, *Principles of Judaism*, and *Philosophy of Religion*, a group is "religious" if they: (1) live as part of a community that defines its identity around a system of beliefs and/or practices; (2) have faith that the fundamentals of the community's system of beliefs, or that the fundamental propositions that make sense of the community's practices, are true; and (3) imaginatively engage with the canonical narratives, metaphors, prescribed games of make-believe, and/or perspectives of the community's system of beliefs and/or practices.

⁸ In Lebens's words, "(1) the universe is the creation of one God; (2) the Torah is a divine system of laws and wisdom, revealed to us by the creator of the universe; and (3) the creator exercises providential care over his creation, manifest in the creator's continued sustenance of the world, reward and

Orthodoxy. Such a move, however, comes with problems that will be discussed below.

Regardless, what is the threshold of confidence needed to embrace Orthodoxy? Lebens writes:

If there is a 50 percent chance that God exists, and a 50 percent chance, if He exists, that He wants Jews to observe Jewish law, then there is a 25 percent chance that both claims are true together. And if there is a 25 percent chance that *God exists and that God wants Jews to keep Jewish law*, and especially if the odds are *better* than that, as I think them to be, then it would be crazy for Pascalberg's audience not to commit to a life of devout religious observance – however hard that may be.⁹

The minimal threshold, then, is demonstrating at least a 50% chance that God exists and another 50% chance that, if He exists, He wants Jews to be observant of Halakhah. If both are provided, then a 25% total chance should be enough to warrant

punishment for human action, and in the promise of ultimate salvation." Lebens, [The Principles of Judaism](#), 3.

⁹ Lebens, 73.

¹⁰ Lebens, 261.

¹¹ Similar debates are currently happening within the world of Christian apologetics. This lengthy [video](#), in which the atheist youtuber Paulogia critiques Christian apologist William Lane Craig's favor of pragmatism over epistemology in assigning credence to Christianity, highlights it well.

¹² Lebens, 79.

commitment to Orthodoxy by the Jewish undecided since they are already pragmatically predisposed to some form of Judaism. Though Lebens notes that the wager would still be effective even if one ends up with considerably lower credence, he assumes that "if you've taken Pascalberg's wager, on the basis of this book's argument... your confidence in the most fundamental principles of Judaism must be around 25 percent (or more)."¹⁰ Therefore, 25% total credence is the magic number that this review will measure toward. While there is perhaps room to critique the view that pragmatic concerns ought to influence one's epistemic judgment, this review will work within Lebens's assumptions, as laid out above.¹¹

Is there at least a 50% chance that God exists? Lebens defines God as "at least this: a supremely good and intelligent agent, powerful enough to bring this universe into being, and to govern its evolution, in accordance with Its will."¹² God, then, must minimally possess a mind, a moral capacity, and the ability to create the universe. Lebens's first case for this sort of being is the sheer unlikeliness of life developing without a guiding hand and how that universe seems to be fine-tuned for the development of intelligent life.¹³

¹³ In his words,

The Big Bang theory, minus the intervention of an outside intelligent power, renders the evolution of life exceedingly unlikely. It becomes much more likely once you posit a power outside of the universe, caring enough to want life to evolve, and powerful enough to have guided things to come out right. (Lebens, 82)

Lebens presents this argument in a more philosophically rigorous format in [Philosophy of Religion](#):

1. It is extremely unlikely that life would have evolved without a sufficiently intelligent and powerful designer overseeing the creation of the universe.

Of course, this argument does not automatically prove God. Scientists may posit, for example, that we exist within a multiverse in which most other universes were not as lucky. Lebens rejects this idea since it replaces one unobservable God with an infinite number of equally unobservable universes.¹⁴ Does this really render God more plausible than a multiverse though? Naturalists may respond that the only theories that can be taken seriously are ones that are testable or follow from theories that are. Sean Carroll, for example, writes that “the multiverse wasn’t invented because people thought it was a cool idea; it was forced on us by our best efforts to understand the portion of the universe that we *do* see”¹⁵ (emphasis added). Ultimately, “some physicists would put the chances [of a multiverse] at nearly certain, others at practically zero. Perhaps it’s fifty-fifty... What matters is that

there is a simple, robust mechanism under which naturalism can be perfectly compatible with the existence of life, even if the life turns out to be extremely sensitive to the precise values of the physical parameters characterizing our environment.”¹⁶

The above case, however, is far from the only one that Lebens brings in defense of theism’s plausibility. A full chapter is dedicated to exploring nearly two dozen arguments for theism from Alvin Plantinga, perhaps the world’s most renowned Christian analytic philosopher.¹⁷ While Lebens acknowledges that no individual argument can ultimately prove the existence of God, they “can serve, cumulatively, as an important source of consideration for weighing up how likely - or plausible - it is that He does.”¹⁸

2. It is not at all unlikely that life would have evolved had there been a sufficiently intelligent and powerful designer overseeing the creation, interested in the evolution of life.

3. Life has evolved.

4. It is much more likely than not that the universe has a designer, interested in the evolution of life, and sufficiently intelligent and powerful to have ensured that life evolves. (Samuel Lebens, *Philosophy of Religion: The Basics* [London: Routledge, 2022], 62)

that make sense of truth and possibility, arguments that make sense of mathematics, arguments that make sense of science, and arguments that make sense of value. Much of the arguments found in the latter two groups also feature heavily in Lebens’s first book (based on his Phd dissertation): [*Bertrand Russell and the Nature of Propositions: A History and Defence of the Multiple Relation Theory of Judgement*](#).

¹⁸ Lebens, 89.

In addition to providing several positive arguments for God’s existence, Lebens also devotes two chapters in response to the problem of evil – largely regarded as one of the strongest objections to theism. As one friend of mine, an atheist philosopher who identifies strongly with Judaism, put it: “The world is a pretty bad place. That’s not to say life isn’t worthwhile, or that there’s not a lot of good stuff. But until there’s even a remotely adequate response to problems of evil, nothing else matters.” Additionally, one can argue that the very existence of problems of evil (regardless of whether or not they ultimately succeed) should inherently lower the credence one assigns to the plausibility of a supremely good God. Lebens offers creative arguments in response to this challenge, but analyzing them would significantly lengthen this review and significantly weaken its general accessibility. As such, I will assume that if a supremely good God can be demonstrated with sufficient confidence, They would surely be able to adequately respond to the problems of evil.

¹⁴ Not to mention that “some of those universes, presumably, contain very powerful God-like beings of their own” (Lebens, 83).

¹⁵ Sean Carroll, [*The Big Picture: On the Origins of Life, Meaning, and the Universe Itself*](#) (New York: Dutton, 2017), 307.

¹⁶ Carroll, 309.

¹⁷ These include his evolutionary argument against naturalism (EAAAN) and modal ontological argument as well as arguments

Lebens then dedicates a chapter to examining personal religious experience. We generally assume that our experiences correspond to something real, so if you have ever had the experience of an encounter with the divine, you should take it seriously. Indeed, Jerome (Yehuda) Gellman argues that “the phenomenon of mystical experiences of God provides initial evidential sufficiency for the conclusion that human beings at least sometimes genuinely experience God” in the same way that our personal experience of anything provides initial reason to believe it, unless proven otherwise.¹⁹

The atheist, though, can respond that they have no reason to change how they believe on the basis of another’s description. Such experiences can also come from many stimuli, and they do not necessarily have to be the result of an encounter with the divine. Gellman himself confirms that “the Argument from Perception [of religious experience] is not universally rationally compelling, in the sense of rationally obligating all who would ponder it.”²⁰ Such an experience may be sufficient for the one who actually perceives it, but it need not influence one who does not share it. They can, of course, choose to assign weight based on the descriptions of others or based on the sheer amount of people who seem to share a common experience of the divine if they feel so compelled.

While none of the arguments presented by Lebens definitively prove God’s existence, he notes that

¹⁹Jerome Gellman, *Mystical Experience of God: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Routledge, 2019), 17.

²⁰ Gellman, 133.

²¹ Lebens, 125.

²² Graham Oppy, *Arguing about Gods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 47.

“what speaks most strongly in favor of God’s existence is the stunning ability of this one simple hypothesis... to make sense of science itself, and mathematics, and philosophy, and *value*. When one simple posit can explain so much, you’ve got a very good reason to endorse it.”²¹ One can perhaps conclude like Graham Oppy that “theism and non-theism are both reasonable responses to the evidence that people have.”²² The atheist has a reply for each argument, but the theist remains on firm footing.

Lebens’s case for Orthodoxy, however, is less smooth. His personal reasoning is that “it seems very likely (on the assumption that [God] exists) that there was some sort of massive revelation to the Jewish people, quite unparalleled in global history: the revelation at Mount Sinai.”²³ But what reason do the Jewish undecided have to believe in such a revelation? Lebens’s main argument is the “Jumbled Kuzari Principle,” championed by Tyron Goldschmidt, which posits:

A tradition is likely true if it is (1) accepted by a nation; describes (2) a national experience of a previous generation of that nation; which (3) would be expected to create a continuous national memory until the tradition is in place;²⁴ is (4) insulting to that nation [e.g., it calls them stiff-necked and lists their

²³ Lebens, 185.

²⁴ Lebens adds to clause 3 that “we don’t just *expect* there to be a continuous memory, but that the nation *claims* to have passed the memory down in an unbroken chain.”

sins]; and (5) makes universal, difficult and severe demands on that nation.²⁵

Lebens notes that “adding so many clauses to the principle makes it look ad hoc, as if it has been reverse engineered to bring people to believe in the biblical story of the Exodus and the revelation at Sinai” but also claims that “each clause of Goldschmidt’s version of the principle, when seen in action, contributes something compelling.”²⁶ The issue with Lebens’s presentation of Goldshmidt’s argument, however, is that it calls for a thought experiment to bolster its claim rather than providing clear examples of stories that match the five criteria which we also know to be historically accurate and cases of proven myths not meeting those criteria. Additionally, while Goldshmidt’s argument may be enough to warrant belief in the divinity of the Torah, Lebens presents no argument to get from there to the Talmud and broader rabbinic tradition. The reader is therefore left unsure of how much credence to actually assign based on the argument alone.

Even then, the 50% chance of a revelation is only half the battle. Lebens still has to show that the Torah, and its Orthodox interpretation, authentically represents it. He does so by noting:

If an all-knowing God exists and orchestrated the Sinai event, then

He *foresaw* the literature, ritual, and law that would come tumbling into being as a result of the Jewish experience at Sinai. And yet, God chose to initiate the experience.

Consequently, I would argue that we should view the theophany at Sinai as something like a divine stamp of approval for the religious tradition that grew out of it.²⁷

Lebens notes that such an approach “ignores the fact that many *competing* traditions can be described as tumbling out of that one event. Presumably, God can’t have been endorsing them all – given their incompatibility.”²⁸ How, then, can he argue specifically for Orthodoxy?

Lebens responds by limiting the scope of God’s approval: “Much of the time, God might not mind which particular route, within the parameters of Jewish law, is chosen by the process of rabbinic debate; God simply endorses the *process*.”²⁹ At any time, in any generation, engagement with Jewish texts can lead to their own set of rituals, cultural expectations, and the like within the communities most committed to studying them and implementing the practices learned therefrom. As long as interpretation stays tied to the source texts, which had God’s initial approval, that which is learned out from them can also have been said to be approved by God. Most forms of non-Orthodox

²⁵ Lebens, 187.

²⁶ Lebens, 187.

²⁷ Lebens, 199. This articulation is similar to that of Emmanuel Rackman, who wrote that “the sanctity of the Pentateuch does not derive from God’s authorship of all of it, but rather from the fact that God’s is the final version. The final writing by Moses has the stamp of divinity - the kiss of immortality.”

(quoted by R. Michael Broyde here: [Biblical Theology of Rabbi Emanuel Rackman - Torah Musings](#))

²⁸ Lebens, 199. This argument, importantly, can apply as easily to Christianity and Islam being said to stem from the Sinai event and not just to competing denominations of Judaism.

²⁹ Lebens, 200.

Judaism, in rejecting so many of those source texts and the lessons contained in them, then, are out of the running as candidates for divine approval. As Lebens points out, “If you’re looking for a community whose membership *defines* itself in terms of commitment to the Jewish textual tradition, you’re likely to find only Orthodox candidates.”³⁰ We will see below, however, that this is not necessarily true.

But it’s also not easy to join an Orthodox community given the appearance of anti-progressivism, anti-intellectualism, elitism, sexism, and homophobia that many perceive. Right or wrong, this impression leads to Orthodoxy being seen as an intuitively unethical choice for many. Even convinced of the viability of revelation, then, Orthodoxy may be a hard sell for the Jewish undecided.

This, however, is not a problem for Lebens. For him, God need not be responsible for every decision that the Orthodox community makes. God endorsed the general process of religious development, not every particular twist and turn along the way. Halakhah, though binding as part of a divine process, is an approximation of God’s will rather than a reflection of it.³¹ Over time, Orthodox communities may develop in a different direction. If one does not have the patience to wait, though,

Lebens advocates picking a sect that is more in line with their moral intuition:

If some pockets of Orthodoxy are *unthinkable* to you, because of the things that they stand for, and because of the ways in which they understand the tradition, then you might want to find that cross section of the Jewish community that (1) defines itself in terms of commitment to the Jewish textual tradition, but which *also* (2) embodies as much ethical sensitivity, and worldliness, as can be rendered consistent with that commitment to the Jewish textual tradition.³²

This however, need not lead one to Orthodoxy. While for Lebens “a modern Orthodoxy is the safest bet, since – to my ethical constitution – certain forms of ultra-Orthodoxy are simply unthinkable,”³³ others may rule out even Modern Orthodoxy due to the same sort of concerns. As long as the community one joins meets Lebens’s criteria, why does it need to be Orthodox at all?

Hadar, for example, [defines itself](#) by its staunch commitment to “*Torah, Avodah, and Hesed*” in a fully egalitarian environment. Indeed, Rabbi Yitz

³⁰ Lebens, 202.

³¹ As Lebens frames it:

A committed Jew can be committed to Jewish law and accept it as binding, all the while recognizing that the revelation is ongoing, that the laws are still evolving, and that what we have in our hands today – however binding it may be – is still, and must be, a mere approximation of God’s inestimable will. God gave His

endorsement to a process, which comprises the evolving legal traditions of committed Jews – the halakha as it is taught and practiced, at any given time, by cross sections of Jewish communities living in faithful dedication to it. (Lebens, 217-218)

³² Lebens, 203.

³³ Lebens, 203.

Greenberg [publicly posted on Facebook](#) that “Hadar is my fantasy of the future modern Orthodox community... committed to Torah learning and full observance of mitzvot. At the same time, the principle of egalitarianism was so precious and important that they practiced it in the here and now, not in a distant future.” Furthermore, [the Conservative Movement’s Statement of Principles](#) notes that Halakhah “is an indispensable element of a traditional Judaism,” and Rabbi David Golinkin has written that “commitment to the centrality of the *halakhah* has been a hallmark of Conservative Judaism”³⁴ for theocentric, ethnocentric, and anthropocentric reasons.³⁵

While one may argue that these communities do not practice what they preach in this regard, it is important to note that Lebens’s criteria is that a community “**defines itself** in terms of commitment to the Jewish textual tradition,”³⁶ not that it always lives as such. If one is content being part of an observant minority, they can do so while still fitting within Lebens’s criteria for Orthodoxy, despite themselves being part of many different non-Orthodox streams of Judaism. Many of those streams, no doubt, even believe that God would prefer people join them than be Orthodox!

³⁴ David Golinkin, [Halakhah for Our Time: A Conservative Approach to Jewish Law](#) (New York: United Synagogue of America, 1991), 7.

³⁵ For that matter, Reform Judaism views the Torah as “as a living, God-inspired document that enables us to confront the challenges of our everyday lives” and encourages adherents to actualize it “through practice that includes reflection, study, worship, ritual, and more.” If so many decidedly non-Orthodox forms of Judaism can potentially be considered “Orthodox” by Lebens’s definition, we seem to have a *reductio ad absurdum*.

³⁶ Lebens, 203. Emphasis added.

It is hard, then, for this approach to guarantee staying within Orthodoxy, especially since Lebens himself offers no practical definition of what Orthodox Judaism ought to look like outside of the abovementioned criteria. In a book with the subtitle “A Philosopher Makes the Case for Orthodox Judaism,” this is a glaring omission and major challenge to the premise.³⁷

Lebens seems to be aware of this critique, since he acknowledges in [The Principles of Judaism](#) that “Orthodoxy can only *coherently* claim that the warrant of Sinai flows *most* forcefully in the direction of Orthodoxy. But this is neither to say that Orthodoxy has a monopoly on religious truth, nor is it to say that Orthodoxy has no religious lessons to learn from other Jewish movements.”³⁸ Lebens even argues that the existence of other Jewish denominations (and, for that matter, other religions) are themselves integral for Torah to properly unfold:

... Many factors play a role in bringing the Torah closer to its heavenly paradigm. Social and political movements, other religions, and more directly, non-Orthodox denominations within

³⁷ Lebens confirmed with me that he did not come up with the book’s subtitle. He, therefore, should not be blamed for this issue. Nonetheless, it is a major issue with the book’s presentation which highlights just how nebulous the term “Orthodox Judaism” is.

³⁸ Samuel Lebens, [the Principles of Judaism](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1. The reason for this difference between works, I think, lies in their respective goals: the [Guide](#) is ultimately an apologetic work while [Principles](#) is simply the presentation of a philosophical analysis. This difference is subtle, but important.

the Jewish world, all play a role in awakening certain sensitivities and attitudes within the Orthodox community. Liberal segments of that community agitate for change within the halakha. Conservative elements within the same community resist any change. The legal traditions themselves create obstacles to some changes, whilst being more amenable to other changes. The changes and evolutions that make it through this process can claim to be an echo of Sinai.³⁹

Under that assumption, one can easily argue that God wants them to be part of the element advocating for change. In doing so, whether on the liberal extreme of Orthodoxy or as a member of a competing denomination that still views Torah as divine, they can argue with total intellectual honesty that they are continuing the Sinai tradition under Lebens's assumptions. As Benjamin Ish-Shalom wrote, "When every view and idea are seen as modes of revelation, skepticism and relativism become transformed into certainty regarding the truth value of any particular view, on the condition that awareness of its relative status within the framework of the all-inclusive unity is preserved."⁴⁰

³⁹ [The Principles of Judaism](#), 218.

⁴⁰ Benjamin Ish-Shalom, "Tolerance and Its Theoretical Basis in the Teaching of Rav Kook," in [Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality](#), eds. Lawrence J. Kaplan and David Shatz (New York: NYU Press, 1995), 182.

⁴¹ An earlier version of this review also discussed whether Lebens's position, which avoids questions of biblical criticism by suggesting that the Torah may itself be the result of such a process of divine approval over time, would itself be accepted

Lebens's second argument, then, is mixed. If one presupposes the existence of God, there is some degree of plausibility that He also revealed Himself to the Jewish people. But does it reach the 50% threshold? That's harder to measure and largely depends on how much weight one assigns Goldshmidt's Jumbled Kuzari Principle. If one is convinced by it, then the likelihood may very well be over 90%. But if one finds it lacking, the chance may be more like 20% or 30% at most. It's clear, then, that only those members of the Jewish undecided who are predisposed to accepting Goldshmidt's argument will have sufficient credence to embrace observance. Though it remains unclear why one who accepts Lebens's argument should specifically be Orthodox.⁴¹

Since Lebens himself does not expect anyone to take the wager with less than 25% credence, it can be assumed that the arguments formulated in his book will *not* convince all of the Jewish undecided to become Orthodox, or observant in general.⁴² But even for those who reached 25% credence, does it really make sense to become observant on the basis of such a wager? Lebens notes in his 2022 book, [Philosophy of Religion: The Basics](#), that allowing one to accept the claims of their current religion with minimal credence as long as there is no extreme counter-evidence can apply to *any*

by mainstream Orthodoxy or if it is in conflict with Maimonides's eighth principle of faith. That section has been removed due to space considerations as well as Lebens's insistence that, regardless of the Torah's historical origins, Orthodox Jews have reason to assume that God wants the Torah to be treated as if it were dictated to Moses word for word at Mt. Sinai.

⁴² Some, however, may still choose to opt in and should obviously be supported in doing so.

religion.⁴³ Should a Jew really be willing to accept Orthodoxy on the basis that we need “better evidence for the falsehood of Judaism than we do for its truth” and that “all the evidence we really need is evidence sufficient to show that Judaism isn’t obviously false”⁴⁴ if doing so implicitly allows for Evangelicals, Catholics, Mormons, Muslims, and more to be justified in doing the same?

Basing one’s faith on such a bet also requires responding to several additional objections. Perhaps it is selfish to base one’s faith on a wager, which effectively turns God into a means to an end. Lebens responds that obeying God’s commands, even without 100% certainty that He exists, is not turning God into a means to an end. It is just obeying what you understand His will to be. God commanded things with the understanding that following them entailed costs and benefits, so it is hard to call calculating those factors avaricious. Additionally, Judaism has a long tradition of encouraging people to initially do commandments not for their own sake, in order to eventually perform them for their own sake.

Another objection may claim that attempting to make yourself believe something despite a lack of sufficient evidence is inauthentic. One could

respond that trying to force belief may lead to developing true belief over time, though Lebens relates this approach to “self-hypnosis.” One might also compare this response to the sunk cost fallacy, which mistakenly assumes that significant investment in a project automatically justifies its continuation, even if the project appears to be failing. In other words, a person would not automatically be justified to continue putting effort into making themselves believe in the absence of evidence just because they have already put in a good amount of effort. But Lebens would respond that this “doesn’t mean that [trying to believe] isn’t the reasonable and rational thing to do given the potential risks, and benefits, and the odds in question.”⁴⁵ Despite a lack of clear evidence, then, it may be that the most rational thing to do is attempt to make yourself believe regardless of whether the minimal threshold is met.

Unfortunately, this response does not fully address the situation that many readers will end up in. Even for those who end up with more than 25% credence, it is far from certain that the *only* reasonable course for someone rooted in the Jewish community is to embrace Orthodox observance. As noted, there are many ways that one can potentially live as a Jew, each of which sees themselves as rooted in a divinely

⁴³ In more formal language, Call the religion in question, religion X. Find a group of people who belong to the community associated with religion X; these people are proud of their cultural identity, and rooted in their community, even though they’re not all that religious. Let’s call that group Audience A. Audience A are, let us imagine, blamelessly rooted to their community in such a way as to render religion X thinkable, and religions other than X unthinkable. For members of A, the only live choices to feed into their practical religious deliberations (until they receive overwhelming evidence for some other religion) will be commitment to X, or little-to-no

commitment to X. Other religions are simply not live options. ([Philosophy of Religion](#), 97)

⁴⁴ These quotes come from Lebens’s chapter, “Is It Rational to Be An Orthodox Jew?,” in [Strauss, Spinoza & Sinai: Orthodox Judaism and Modern Questions of Faith](#), eds. Jeffrey Bloom, Alec Goldstein, and Gil Student (New York: Kodesh Press, 2022), 209. That chapter was itself heavily based on [Lebens’s conversation with Rabbi Dovid Bashavkin](#) on the *18Forty* podcast.

⁴⁵ Lebens, 266.

inspired textual tradition. If one is to view Orthodoxy as the **only** reasonable way to experience Judaism, they need to have good epistemic reason. 25% credence may be enough to justify general

observance, but not necessarily within Orthodoxy.

Furthermore, even if one accepts a 25% credence for Orthodoxy, that still allows for 75% against it.⁴⁶ This is a problem since Lebens himself notes that “to the extent that [the fundamental propositions of Orthodox Judaism] are ill-grounded by the evidence, and certainly to the extent that they are victim to counter-evidence, the religion will be less justified.”⁴⁷ This problem is made all the more worrying by the fact that, as Sean Carroll points out, one of the principles of credential reasoning is that “evidence that favors one alternative automatically disfavors others.”⁴⁸ Therefore, the 75% credence that does not support Orthodox Judaism ought to actively count against their credence in Orthodox Judaism. For many, this is likely an uneasy concession.

We are left, then, at an odd point. While there is ample room to demonstrate a 50% credence that God exists, revelation is a mixed bag. While many will be at least 50% convinced, others may reject the Jumbled Kuzari Principle to varying degrees. Furthermore, even those who end up with a 25% or higher total credence still run the risk of not ending up within Orthodoxy at all. Even those who do would need to find peace with the idea of resting their commitment to Orthodox Judaism on

⁴⁶ To use the words of a friend of mine, a thoughtful member of the “Jewish undecided” on his own path: “According to Halakhah, when there is a *sfek sfeikah* (double doubt), even in a matter that is *de-Oraita*, one rules leniently. Hence, there is (1) a *safek* whether God exists and (2) an additional *safek* that even if God exists, He didn't give the Torah (and/or authorize

a wager that has a significant chance of not paying off. While this may be a wager that many accept,

there seems to be little reason to assume that Orthodoxy is the *only* rational option for the Jewish undecided.

Regardless, [The Guide for the Jewish Undecided](#) is a remarkable step forward in a genre that can loosely be described as internal Jewish apologetics. This in itself is a major accomplishment since, as Etai Lahav noted in [his own review](#), Jews in search of high-level analytic philosophical cases for theism could only find affordable and accessible works by Christian authors until now.

Lebens makes a strong, passionate, modest, and non-coercive case that does not shy away from difficult questions or sacrifice rigorous philosophy on the altar of popular spirituality. As an argument for commitment to Halakhah in general, it is one of the strongest yet made. In the spirit of Rabbi Sacks, his argument is truly “authoritative without being authoritarian, unifying without ceasing to be pluralist, and rational without lacking passion.” While it may not be fully convincing to some, it will no doubt strengthen and guide many on the path toward thinking actively about their Jewish identities and the place of Halakhah therein.

Thank you to my teacher, Rabbi Dr. Sam Lebens, for encouraging me to write this review, Rabbi

the halakhic process as a reflection of His will). Thus, employing this Talmudic logic, one can absolve themselves from halakhic obligation.”

⁴⁷ Lebens, 268.

⁴⁸ [The Big Picture](#), 81.

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LAUGHTER IN THE FACE OF TRAGEDY: THE ENDURING RESISTANCE OF RABBI AKIVA

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It is often assumed that humor has no place in the religious experience. Indeed, many instances in the Talmud recall the seriousness with which the sages studied their ancestral texts, and Halakhah forbids any Jew from engaging in prayer if he or she is in a state of *sehok*, laughter, or *kalut rosh*, levity.¹ There is no humor in the Bible, many argue (although that has been challenged in recent years)²; it is unusual—perhaps even irreverent—to imagine God as one with whom we can joke. Even as society has increasingly come to appreciate the psychological value of laughter, it is still largely left out of the religious experience. This approach can be summed up in the words of the influential 20th century

theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr:

Laughter must be heard in the outer courts of religion...but there is no laughter in the holy of holies. There laughter is swallowed up in prayer and humor is fulfilled by faith...If we persist in laughter when dealing with the final problem of human existence, when we turn life into a comedy, we also reduce it to meaninglessness.³

And yet, as I will explore in this discussion, we often find laughter in the most unexpected of places: tragedy.

There has been an increasing amount of research in recent years on humor as a coping mechanism for marginalized or oppressed populations, as well as communities beset by tragedy. For instance, researchers have studied the role of humor in the lives of Holocaust survivors—not only in the years after the atrocities, but also while in the camps themselves. In his remarkable reflection of the will to survive during the Holocaust, [Man's Search for Meaning](#), Viktor Frankl wrote:

Humor was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation. It is well known that humor, more than anything else in

¹ On negative approaches to *sehok* (laughter) in rabbinic literature, see: *Avot* 3:13; *Avot* 6:6; *b. Berakhot* 31a. On *sehok* as an impediment for prayer, see: *t. Berakhot* 3:21; *b. Berakhot* 31a; and in later Halakhah, *Shulhan Arukh Orach Hayyim* 93:2.

² See, for instance, the discussion in Yehuda T. Radday, "On Missing the Humour in the Bible: An Introduction," in [On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible](#), eds. Yehuda T.

Radday and Athalya Brenner (BLS 23; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 21-38.

³ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Humor and Faith," in [The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses](#), ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 49-60.

the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds.⁴

Many individuals may be able to recall times where laughter offered an opportunity to rise above a difficult situation or recapture a sense of humanity during a tragic experience. What is it about laughter that allows one to regain a sense of self amidst the darkest moments of life? How can laughter serve an existential—even religious—purpose? I want to explore this question through the study of some passages in the Midrash and Talmud which reflect on the nature of destruction.

In the wake of 70 CE, when the Temple was destroyed and the Jews were subject to complete Roman domination, the rabbis offered a variety of halakhic and psychological responses to the destruction. In *Sifre Deuteronomy* 43,⁵ we read the story of R. Akiva and his colleagues as they express different approaches to living with this new reality:

And it once was that Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Akiva were entering Rome, and they heard the sound of the multitudes from Puteoli at a distance of one hundred and twenty *mil*. The Sages began weeping and Rabbi Akiva was laughing.

They said to him, “For what reason are we crying and are you laughing?”

Rabbi Akiva said to them, “And you, for what reason are you weeping?”

They said to him, “Should we not cry, that these gentiles, who sacrifice to idols and bow to false gods, dwell securely and in tranquility, and for us, the House of the footstool of our God, was consumed by fire, and has become the habitation of wild beasts?”

Rabbi Akiva said to them, “That is why I am laughing. If this is what he gave to those who anger him, how much more so to the doers of his will!”

In the first part of this *midrash*, the sages are walking through Rome and hear the distant sounds of the empire—though I imagine it felt very close to them. Three of the sages begin to cry, recalling the horrific experiences the Jews endured during the Great Revolt. This seems, to us, a natural response: cry at tragedy. R. Akiva, however, offers another reaction: he laughs. R. Akiva finds joy in the ultimate redemption that will certainly come. The *midrash* does not record his colleagues’ responses, but it continues:

Another time, they were going up to Jerusalem. When they reached Mount Scopus, they tore their clothes.

When they came to the Temple Mount, they saw a fox running out

⁴ [*Man’s Search for Meaning*](#) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959; 2006), 43.

⁵ The story also appears in *b. Makkot* 24a-b, with some minor changes. The *Sifre* version is significantly older than the Bavli version, dating to the third century, and much closer in time to the actual figures in the narrative.

of the (ruined) building of the Holy of Holies. They began to weep, while R. Akiva laughed.

They said to him, “Akiva, you always astonish us – we are weeping, yet you laugh!”

He replied, “Why are you weeping?”

They said to him, “Should we not weep when a fox emerges from the place of which it is written, *And the commoner that encroaches shall be put to death* (Numbers 1:51)? This is indeed how the verse, *Because of this our hearts are sick, because of these our eyes are dimmed: Because of Mount Zion, which lies desolate; foxes prowl over it* (Lamentations 5:17-18), has been fulfilled for us.”

This narrative parallels the first, though the imagery here is even starker: a fox crawls out of the Temple ruins. Based on the sages’ bewilderment once again at R. Akiva’s laughter, we can assume that they were not quite satisfied with his first explanation. This time, however, the sages engage in a different sort of conversation: an academic one. Each side employs Torah verses to support their emotional response. The sages cry because the prophecies of destruction have indeed been fulfilled: what a terrible fate the Jews have achieved! R. Akiva, on the other hand, utilizes the biblical verses in a characteristically midrashic way. The *midrash* continues:

He [R. Akiva] said to them, “This is precisely why I laughed, for it is said, *And call reliable witnesses, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of*

Yeberechiah, to witness for me (Isaiah 8:2).

Now what is the connection between Uriah and Zechariah? Uriah said, *Zion shall be plowed as a field, Jerusalem shall become heaps of ruins, and the Temple Mount a shrine in the woods* (Jeremiah 26:18). What did Zechariah say? *Thus said the Lord of Hosts: There shall yet be old men and women in the squares of Jerusalem,* etc. (Zechariah 8:4). Said God, “These are My two witnesses” – if the words of Uriah are fulfilled, so will the words of Zechariah be fulfilled; if the words of Uriah are annulled, so will the words of Zechariah be annulled. I rejoice that the words of Uriah have been fulfilled, [because this means that] in the end the words of Zechariah will be fulfilled.”

They said to him, “Akiva you have comforted us.”

R. Akiva quotes a verse from Isaiah which recalls Uriah and Zechariah, and asks: what are these two doing next to each other? This is a classic question that we’ve all come across in our Torah learning, namely, what is *x* doing next to *y*? This is not just about the Torah’s structure; for R. Akiva, the answer to this question has spiritual—indeed almost prophetic—meaning. R. Akiva locates the metonyms “Uriah” and “Zechariah” in other verses from Nevi’im: the first forewarns of a desolate Jerusalem, the latter foretells a rebuilt Jerusalem. In order for the redemption prophecy of Zechariah to be fulfilled, R. Akiva explains, the prophecies of

destruction—symbolized by the words of Uriah—must be fulfilled. This, finally, comforts the rabbis.

I want to suggest that the laughter in this narrative serves a dual function: one political, and one theological. Politically, the laughter acts as resistance against the Romans, a way of asserting their own humanity amidst oppression. This is not an uncommon phenomenon: one way in which subjugated peoples express their humanity and reclaim some semblance of power is through laughter. In Ancient Rome itself, humor was weaponized as a political tool: whoever controlled the laughter held the power. Cassius Dio, the second century CE Roman senator—living around the time of our narrative’s protagonists—describes an imperial party with theatrical performances that lasted weeks, and records that the audience was *commanded* to react in specific desired ways at the emperor’s performance. They had to laugh on cue, and, of course, withhold laughter when they’re not supposed to. In controlling their emotions, the emperor maintained his power over his subjects. Dio then records a scene which is as hilarious as it is terrifying:

He [Emperor Commodus] did something else along the same lines to us senators, which gave us good reason to think that we were about to die. That is to say, he killed an ostrich, cut off its head, and came over to where we were sitting, holding up the head in his left hand and in his right the bloody sword. He said absolutely nothing, but with

a grin he shook his own head, making it clear that he would do the same to us. And in fact many would have been put to death on the spot by the sword for laughing at him (for it was laughter rather than distress that took hold of us) if I had not myself taken some laurel leaves from my garland and chewed on them, and persuaded the others sitting near me to chew on them too—so that, by continually moving our mouths, we might hide the fact that we were laughing.⁶

The emperor threatens to kill the senators with a gruesome symbolic slaughter of an ostrich, and how do they react? They laugh! Historian Mary Beard, writing on this incident, asserts that “power is met, and spontaneously challenged, by laughter.”⁷ In the face of the utmost existential crisis—unjust death—the only response, to maintain a semblance of self, may be to laugh.

In this light, R. Akiva’s laughter—both at the sounds of the Roman marching and at the sight of a fox emerging from the Temple ruins—is resistance to Roman hegemony. It is a way of reclaiming the power for the powerless, just as Dio did (in fact, the senators were not killed; the emperor himself was assassinated a short while later). Emotions, many historians have recently shown, play a critical role in the negotiation of power.⁸ And emotional resistance to power allows one to recapture that power and loss of agency. R. Akiva’s laughter is so much more than an unusual response—it is a way of

⁶ [Roman History](#) 73.21.

⁷ Mary Beard, [Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up](#) (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 4.

⁸ See especially Ari Mermelstein’s recent book, [Power and Emotion in Ancient Judaism](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

exercising autonomy in the face of oppression.

There is a second angle of resistance, as I mentioned: and that is theological. The destruction was not only caused by the Romans— in the rabbinic understanding, it was a divine punishment. It came from God. In a world in which we understand God to be at least somewhat involved in the workings of humanity, how do we explain evil and tragedy? This is the classical question of theodicy that God-adhering individuals struggle with to this day—and is the very question at the heart of our narrative.

In order to understand the theological and existential import of laughter, another ancient Roman model will be useful here: the two philosophers Heraclitus and Democritus. These two philosophers lived around the fourth and fifth centuries BCE, and probably didn't overlap with each other—or if they did, probably didn't know each other. Heraclitus' writings support the view that the world is constantly in "flux," and that everything is made of its opposites; to Democritus is attributed an atomistic view of the world. But by the time the Hellenistic period rolled around, some five centuries later, their actual philosophical outlooks were largely replaced by new literary personas. These two philosophers reappeared in writings always together, and with distinct identities: Heraclitus was always crying, and Democritus was always laughing. For instance, the first century CE Stoic philosopher Seneca the Younger writes:

Whenever Heraclitus went forth from his house and saw all around him so many men who were living a wretched life—no, rather dying a wretched death—he would weep,

and all the joyous and happy people he met stirred his pity; he was gentle-hearted, but too weak, and was himself one of those who had need of pity. Democritus, on the other hand, it is said, never appeared in public without laughing, so little did the serious pursuits of man seem serious to him.⁹

In Greek philosophy as adapted in the mid-imperial period (particularly through the Stoics and then Cynics), laughter was taken as a way to deal with the absurdity of life: there is no meaning, and everything can be reduced to atoms. This is the approach of Democritus, at least as he is presented in these texts. Weeping, on the other hand, was a response to a similar absurdist perspective, but instead of laughing at the incongruity of life and the helplessness of man, the Heraclitan persona wept at the predicament of humanity in the face of the capricious world. It is no comedy, but a deep tragedy.

Rabbi Akiva's colleagues, it appears, represent Heraclitus in their professed explanation of their weeping at the sight of destruction: "Should we not cry, that these gentiles, who sacrifice to idols and bow to false gods, dwell securely and in tranquility, and for us, the House of the footstool of our God, was consumed by fire, and has become the habitation of wild beasts?"

It is the reversal of fortune that prompts the sages to cry; the very incomprehensibility of God's world that elicits such an emotion. This is a common reaction in the face of tragedy: it feels unfair. The world, once rational and just, suddenly seems unknowable. In this view, the world is a topsy-turvy

⁹ [*De Ira* 2.10.5.](#)

nightmare of instability that does not guarantee the security of ultimate justice and morality.¹⁰ This is, in essence, Greek absurdism, which found a new form in 19th and 20th century existentialist philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Albert Camus.

On the other end of this, however, is Rabbi Akiva. He laughs, but not the Democritean laughter (*gelos*) that mocks the unknowability of the world; he laughs precisely because the world *is* knowable. It is a joyous, harmonious laugh, known in ancient Greek as *euthemia*, that perhaps better describes the real Democritus' temperament and philosophic outlook.¹¹ It is a laughter of peace with the world, of contentment with a just outcome. It is not a laughter that makes a mockery of life and reduces it to meaninglessness—it is precisely a laughter that gives meaning to life.

R. Akiva's laughter is supported by a *midrash* about the prophecies of destruction and restoration. The very act of *midrash*—the act of biblical interpretation—is itself the act of rabbinic self-construction; it is what enabled the rabbis to persist in a post-destruction world and find meaning in their tradition. R. Akiva claims knowability of the world through his interpretation of Torah, which is,

¹⁰ On existential absurdism in rabbinic thought, see Christine Hayes' recent article, "Roman Power through Rabbinic Eyes: Tragedy or Comedy?" in *Reconsidering Roman Power: Roman, Greek, Jewish and Christian Perceptions and Reactions*, ed. Katell Berthelot (Rome: Publications de l'École française de Rome, 2020), 443-471. Through a close reading of a number of eschatological narratives about Gentiles in the World to Come, Christine Hayes shows that a significant strain of rabbinic thought did not anticipate an upward moral arc of the world, what Hayes calls a "divine comedy." Instead, she argues, some rabbis perceived the world to be a "divine tragedy."

¹¹ Stephen Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 353.

in the rabbinic mindset, the only way to truly know anything meaningful about the world.¹² R. Akiva's laughter, followed by his turn to text, is a radical reframing of the catastrophic moment of helplessness and vulnerability. It says that we can, in fact, have confidence in the justice of the world and the ultimate redemption, and the way to do that is through the study of Torah.

Through his laughter, R. Akiva resists the notion that the only future is a bleak one, that God will only continue to bring evil and injustice—or perhaps worse, that God is absent from the world. This is theological resistance. His notion of God, from his interpretation of the verses from *Nevi'im*, is one of ultimate justice and restoration. Coupled with political resistance against the Roman oppression, R. Akiva's laughter is a symbol to his colleagues of the enduring faith in God and humanity.

Perhaps even more well-known than this *midrash* is the story of R. Akiva's martyrdom in *Bavli Berakhot* 61b.¹³ There, R. Akiva is taken out to be killed by Romans in the wake of the failed Bar Kokhba Revolt in 135 CE, and at the very last moment he readies himself to recite the *Shema*, explaining to his students that forever he has yearned to fulfill his

¹² For rabbinic conceptions of *midrash*, see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), especially p. 17: "[O]ur conception of *midrash* is one in which the text makes its meaning in history," which is a fitting descriptor for the role that *midrash* plays here.

¹³ Following ms. Oxford 366; there are some notable changes in the printed edition of the Talmud which add martyrological elements that are not present in the manuscripts. See Paul Mandel, "Was Rabbi Aqiva a Martyr? Palestinian and Babylonian Influences in the Development of a Legend," in *Rabbinic Traditions Between Palestine and Babylonia*, eds. Ronit Nikolsky and Tal Ilan (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 306-353.

own teaching of the phrase “love the Lord your God ...with all your soul” – even at death. This is a tale of deep devotion to God even in the face of all adversity, a similar depiction to the R. Akiva of our *Sifre* narrative. Love of God is surely present in this narrative, but missing from the Bavli text is the notion of resistance that was so defining in the *Sifre midrash*. For that, we may turn to the parallel text in the Yerushalmi, which is chronologically earlier than the Bavli’s narrative and likely served as the source for it.

The Yerushalmi reads:

Rabbi Akiva was judged before the evil Tinius Rufus. There came the time for reciting the *Shema*. He started to read and laughed.

He said to him: Old man, you are either a sorcerer or one contemptuous of suffering.

He said to him: The spirit of this man should be blown away; I am neither a sorcerer nor contemptuous of sufferings. But all my life I read this verse and said, when will I have occasion for these three (Deut. 6:5): “You must love the Eternal, your God, with all your heart, all your soul, and all your force.” I loved Him with all my heart. I loved Him with all my money. But whether with all my soul I could not test. But now, when “with all your soul” came, the time of reciting the *Shema* has arrived and my mind has

not wavered, therefore I am reciting and laughing.

He had not finished speaking when his soul flew away.¹⁴

R. Akiva is tried by Tinius Rufus; unlike in the Bavli, there is no certainty that he is going to die. At that moment, the time for recitation of the *Shema* fortuitously arrived. In this version of the story, R. Akiva’s laughter functions precisely the same way as it had in the *Sifre*, as a tool of political resistance against the ruling power. The Roman representative himself is the only witness—unlike in the Bavli, where it is his students who question his actions—highlighting once again the nature of laughter as a subversion of power. Tinius Rufus is understandably perplexed by the laughter, perhaps even angry: his bewilderment is the turning point at which the power imbalance shifts from the Roman to the rabbi. Finally, at the very last moment and in his recitation of the verses, R. Akiva has the upper-hand. Before he even finishes speaking, his soul departs—before he can be killed by the Roman.

The laughter is notably missing in the Bavli narrative, and with it, the act of power subversion and the clear confidence in divine justice. Indeed, after R. Akiva’s death in the Bavli, the narrative continues with the ministering angels questioning God, “is this Torah and is this its reward?”—a poignant and accusatory appeal. The Bavli tolerates a strain of existential absurdism, acknowledging that sometimes, even the angels don’t know the answer to theodicy. This is not an uncommon perspective in the Bavli; scholars show that questions of theodicy travel from the Yerushalmi to Bavli with somewhat differing approaches, with the

¹⁴ *Y. Berakhot* 9:5, 14b; also *y. Sotah* 5:7, 20c. [Translation from Heinrich W. Guggenheimer](#) (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999-2015).

Yerushalmi offering greater consolation in the end, while the Bavli is more likely to express uncertainty and doubt at the inner workings of the world.¹⁵

Pulling these pieces together, we have a strong image of emotional responses in the face of injustice and tragedy. We have seen the rabbis grapple with existentialism and absurdism, fearing that no redemption may arrive. On the other side of this, R. Akiva's stalwart belief in God and Torah expresses itself in each of these texts. Emotion is inextricably linked with power; those who have control of their emotional responses can regain a sense of humanity and agency amidst subjugation, shifting the power imbalance. In these narratives, this phenomenon is most acutely expressed in R. Akiva's laughter. In the *Sifre*, laughter allows the rabbis to be comforted by the ultimate rabbinic exercise in autonomy—the act of *midrash*, or interpretation of Torah. *Midrash*—engaging with the text, finding meaning in the prophetic words, and ascribing metaphysical significance to history—is what sustained the Jewish people after the destruction in 70 CE, and again after the further oppression following Bar Kokhba in 135.

Rabbi Akiva's laughter is not a sinister laughter that mocks the absurdity and unknowability of the world. It is an act of healing, protesting Roman power and protesting the notion of a fundamentally meaningless existence. It is a religious experience, that by resisting the notion of God's world as a divine tragedy restores the sages' faith in the future and in God. Returning to Niebuhr, with whom we started this essay, it cannot be true that “there is no laughter in the holy of holies”—for that is exactly

where R. Akiva laughs! Laughter, as I hope I have shown, does not “reduce life to meaninglessness,” but has the power to do just the opposite: ascribe meaning and agency to the darkest moments of history. It is true that there will always be the unknowable questions of theodicy—as the Bavli narrative reminds us—but the point to be underscored is this: the world is not ultimately tragic. Morality will triumph. And that is a cause for joy.

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¹⁵ Yaakov Elman, “The Suffering of the Righteous in Palestinian and Babylonian Sources,” *JQR* 80 (1990): 315-339; and idem., “Righteousness as Its Own Reward: An Inquiry into

the Theologies of the Stam,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 57 (1991): 35-67. See also Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 182-202.