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### ***The Many Hats of Heresy: Epikorsut and Minut in the Writings of the Sages***

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#### ***Introduction***

R. Moses Maimonides, or Rambam, one of the greatest theologians to ever live, famously excludes four groups of people from the Mishnaic principle that all Jews have a portion in the World to Come<sup>1</sup> on the basis of wrongful theology:

*minim, epikorsim,*<sup>2</sup> *koferim ba-Torah* (deniers of Torah), and *koferim be-tehi'at ha-meitim u-ve-vi'at ha-go'eil* (deniers of the Resurrection and of the Messianic Era).<sup>3</sup> The latter categories are readily understood: to deny a certain theological principle of a faith is to distance oneself from that faith. As such, one cannot claim to be deserving of heaven by dint of their status as “Jew” if they have removed themselves from the Jewish faith community. The other two, however, are much less clear. Hazal’s use of each term varies, making their core sense difficult to pin down. Maimonides himself [provides](#) a descriptive definition:

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<sup>1</sup> [Sanhedrin 10:1](#).

<sup>2</sup> Translation for these phrases will be developed over the course of the article. Preliminarily, we might say that *minim* means “heretics” and *epikorsim* means “apostates.”

<sup>3</sup> Maimonides, [Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 3:6](#).

Five individuals are described as *minim*:

a) one who says there is no God nor ruler of the world;

b) one who accepts the concept of a ruler, but maintains that there are two or more;

c) one who accepts that there is one Master [of the world], but maintains that He has a body or form;

d) one who maintains that He was not the sole First Being and Creator of all existence;

e) one who serves a star, constellation, or other entity so that it will serve as an intermediary between him and the eternal Lord.  
...

Three individuals are described as *Epikorsim*:

a) one who denies the existence of prophecy and maintains that there

is no knowledge communicated from God to the hearts of men;

b) one who disputes the prophecy of Moses, our teacher;

c) one who maintains that the Creator is not aware of the deeds of men. ...<sup>4</sup>

For Maimonides, apparently, each term may be better described as a category of heresies than as a particular heresy. And yet, one cannot escape the feeling that there is more to these terms.

#### ***Epikorsut***

Indeed, *Epikorus* (singular) is likely a derivative of the Greek Επίκουρος, i.e. Epicurus, the name of a philosopher of the fourth century BCE whose worldview was predicated on a radical materialism that rejects supernaturalism.<sup>5</sup> Thus, it may be said that an *epikorus* is, in fact, an Epicurean.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this fits Maimonides' list quite nicely: Epicurus, who believes that maximalization of hedonistic pleasure is the purpose of life,<sup>7</sup> must deny the notion of Divine Law or Lawgiver, even if he can accept the concept of a God or gods (as he does), for such would imply greater purpose and impose

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 3:7-8. Trans. Eliyahu Touger, Moznaim Publishing, with adaptations by author. Other translations below are by the author, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>5</sup> See David Konstan, "[Epicurus](#)", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2025 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.).

<sup>6</sup> This is not a novel idea. For example, Heinrich W. Guggenheimer employed this definition of *epikorus* in his 1999-2015 translation of the Jerusalem Talmud. For an overview of the Sages' thoughts about Epicureanism, see Yaakov Jaffe, "[The Fourth Chapter of Avot as an Extended Reflection on Epicurean Philosophy](#)," *The Lehrhaus* (December 25, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

limits on one's pleasure-seeking activities. Thus, for an Epicurean, providence is a nonstarter, even if there is a God or gods.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore no surprise that when Maimonides refers to those philosophers who reject providence, he uses the term *epikorus*.<sup>9</sup>

The Sages say very little about the *epikorus* to confirm or deny this thesis. In three places, they address the term, but in all three cases they provide what may be more properly termed an "indication" rather than a definition:

The *epikorus*: R. Joḥanan and R. Elazar, one said [that an *epikorus* is] like him who said [scornfully] "this book" [i.e., the Torah] and one said, like him who said [scornfully] "these rabbis" ([y. Sanhedrin 10:1](#)).

"Because he has despised the word of the Lord" ([Num. 15:31](#)): this is a reference to an *epikorus* ([Sanhedrin 99a](#)).

*Epikorus*: Rab and R. Ḥanina both say: This is one who treats a Torah scholar with contempt. R. Joḥanan and R. Joshua b. Levi say: This is one who treats another with contempt before a Torah scholar ([Sanhedrin 99b](#)).

In all three places, rather than define the term, the Sages opt to indicate the *epikorus* by describing his most noticeable deviancies. Nowhere in the writings of the Sages can a proper definition for the *epikorus*—that is to say, a breakdown of where an *epikorus* differs from a rabbinic Jew theologically—be found. An *epikorus* may be characterized, though not defined, by his irreverent behavior towards Torah and her scholars. The lack of definition is itself telling: the only reason the Sages would fail to provide a definition for such a ubiquitous term is if they felt it unnecessary. Said otherwise, the absence of definition in the writings of the Sages demonstrates that the term was popularly known. It is often unnecessary for a twenty-first-century author to define terms like "Aristotelian" or "communist"; such terminology can be assumed in most contexts. So too was Epicureanism in the times of the Sages: as a philosophy that denied the transcendent, it was a main combatant of Judaism and, more acutely, Christianity in (approximately) the first five centuries CE, and was thus a known entity.

Interestingly, this definition of *epikorus* loses traction in the centuries after Epicureanism lost its cultural prevalence. In the fifteenth century, the great Mishnaic commentator, R. Obadiah of Bartenura (c. 1445-1515), defines the *epikorus* like

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<sup>8</sup> See Tim O'Keefe, [Epicureanism](#) (University of California Press, 2010), 155-156.

<sup>9</sup> Maimonides, [Guide for the Perplexed 3:17:1](#). This is not to say that the definition of *epikorus* we have just suggested

would have been accepted by Maimonides. Just that, since the term originally referred to Epicureanism in the early Hazalic writings, Maimonides' examples often reflect that definition.

this:

To an epikorus: This is an expression of ownerlessness [or surrender] (*hefkeir*), since he disgraces the Torah and treats it as if it were ownerless. Alternatively, he makes himself as though he were ownerless [for] he cares not for his soul, lest evil come upon him [in retribution] for his desecration of the Torah and her scholars.<sup>10</sup>

For this commentator, the Sages' indication is treated as though it were a definition. This is hardly surprising: such legalists and Talmud commentators as Rambam or Bartenura would be expected to maintain Talmudic "definitions" rather than supply their own.<sup>11</sup> Thus, working with the very limited information he had, R. Obadiah was cornered into this definition (though he does

postulate a linguistic connection between the root of "hefkeir" [P-K-R] and "epikorus" in support). Broadly speaking, this more vague definition has been the one preserved by the rabbinic tradition ever since.

### ***Minut***

More interesting, especially within the writings of the Sages, is the other term Maimonides mentions: the *min*. Usually translated 'heretics,' *minim* are typically understood to be Jews who have left the faith—not those who convert to other religions, but those who reject certain basic tenets of the Jewish faith.

Traditional *minut* normatively refers to the acceptance of a pantheon of gods (often most closely associated with Trinitarian Christianity),<sup>12</sup> and not the atheistic rejection of God (though such is not unfounded in the writings of the Sages).<sup>13</sup> Thus, the Mishnah states that the

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<sup>10</sup> Bartenura to *Avot* 2:14, s.v. "[le-Epikorus](#)."

<sup>11</sup> This definition can also be found in the writings of Maimonides; see commentary to *Mishnah Sanhedrin*, [intro. to ch. 10](#). Maimonides himself gives a second definition of *Epikorus* which is somewhat lacking in critical boundaries. That is to say, it is extremely vague and extremely general:

The *epikorsim* are those who stray after the thoughts of their hearts, concerning themselves with the foolish matters mentioned above, until they ultimately transgress against the body of Torah [law] arrogantly, with scorn, with the intent of provoking God's anger, and yet say that there is no sin involved. ([Mishneh Torah](#),

### [Laws of Foreign Worship and Customs of the Nations 2:5](#))

As commentators note, this definition is incongruous with Maimonides' previous characterization of the *Epikorus*. (See, e.g., R. Joseph Karo's [Kesef Mishneh, ad loc.](#)) Thus, they argue, and compellingly so, that this passage does not inform our discussion. This view has since been vindicated by [manuscripts that read "minim"](#) rather than "*epikorsim*" in this passage (as well as in the [Laws of Murder and the Preservation of Life 4:10](#)).

<sup>12</sup> At the most extreme, R. Solomon Isaacides (Rashi) defines *Minim* as "idolaters" in his [commentary to Berakhot 12a, s.v. "ha-minin."](#)

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., [Berakhot 12b](#) and [Sifra Devarim 320:10](#), which identify *minut* as atheism. It is clear that, as time went on,

“*minim* declare that there are multiple forces in Heaven.”<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein, the Talmud records a *min* asking R. Simlai (c. 250-290) “how many gods created the world,” intrigued as he was by the plural language employed in [Genesis 1](#).<sup>15</sup> These generic uses of the term indicate the general scope of its use: a *min* is a Jew whose views of God are so maverick as to constitute heresy, usually on the issue of His singularity or simplicity.

Thus, Heinrich Guggenheimer writes in his notes on the Jerusalem Talmud that the word ‘*min*’ “always denotes a Jewish Christian.”<sup>16</sup> Christianity is indeed the most obvious candidate for *minut*; to the rabbis’ eyes, it was neither proper idolatry nor was it a correct understanding of the God of Abraham. Hence it was often deemed heretical rather than idolatrous. One of the clearest examples of *min* being used in reference to a Christian in the Talmud is the following incident:

It so happened with R. Eliezer b. Dama, the son of R. Ishmael’s sister, that a snake bit him, and Jacob, a man from Kfar Sekhanya, came to heal him [MS Vienna adds, “in the

name of Jeshua ben Panteira<sup>17</sup>”] and R. Ishmael did not allow it. He said to him, “You are not allowed, b. Dama!” [R. Eliezer b. Dama] said to him, “I will bring you proof that he can heal me,” [i.e., that it is permitted to allow him to perform the healing,] but he did not have enough time to bring him proof before he died. R. Ishmael said, “[R. Eliezer] b. Dama is fortunate that he departed to eternal peace, and did not tear down the fences of the Sages, before [divine] retribution came upon him,” as it is said ([Ecc. 10:8](#)), “He who tears down a fence will be bitten by a snake” ([Tosefta Hullin 2:6](#)).<sup>18</sup>

Details of the story aside, what is important to us is that Jacob of Sekhanya, a [known Christian](#) of second-century Judea, is here considered to be a *min*, ostensibly for the crime of being Christian. This story—and the many stories like it—represents the strongest evidence for the claim

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the term came to be the equivalent of the generic English word ‘heresy,’ without any particular meaning, see, e.g., [Sanhedrin 38b](#).

<sup>14</sup> [Sanhedrin 4:5](#). Though this statement has been taken out of context, it retains its original meaning.

<sup>15</sup> [y. Berakhot 9:1](#). See also [Sanhedrin 38b](#); [Genesis Rabbah 8:9](#).

<sup>16</sup> See [Guggenheimer to y. Berakhot 1:5, note 216](#). It seems unlikely that his claim is entirely correct—that is to say, that every reference to a *min* is a veiled reference to a Christian

(see, e.g., [Mishnah Berakhot 9:5](#) which is clearly not a reference to mainstream Christianity). Nevertheless, his assertion that there is a link between the two terms is well-founded.

<sup>17</sup> A Christian or proto-Christian leader (see [Avodah Zarah 17a](#)). His identity is not known; some speculate that this was Jesus, others that this was a forerunner of Jesus. In either case, the *Tosefta* is simply attempting to demonstrate why R. Ishmael refused Jacob’s services.

<sup>18</sup> See also [Avodah Zarah 27b](#), for another variant of this story.

that *minut* was meant to slyly refer to Christianity. A second very compelling bit of evidence is the *Tosefta*'s ruling that "the [Torah] scrolls of heretics are not saved from burning" on the Sabbath, as saving the scrolls would constitute a violation of the laws of the Sabbath, something only permissible to save proper Torah scrolls, but not those of heretics.<sup>19</sup> Why, though, would a common heretic have a Torah scroll? Certainly neither atheist nor pagan would feel the need to commission one (a hefty expense), so the most likely candidate is the Christian. This is not absolute proof—after all, the heretic in this passage may be a Jew who regards himself as pious but has maverick positions about the nature of God—but it is indicative, when considered along with the previous argument, that the term *min* is often used to refer to Christians, or—at least—to Jewish Christians. Another potential bit of evidence may be gleaned from the Talmudic sage R. Sheshet's aversion to praying while facing East. As he explains to his companion, the reason he is so averse to facing East during prayers "is not because [the East] does not contain the Divine Presence, but because such is the instruction of the *minim*."<sup>20</sup> This may be yet another hidden

reference to the Christians; several Church Fathers do indeed instruct their followers to pray while facing East.<sup>21</sup>

However, as we will argue, this is not the primary meaning of the term in the writings of the Sages. That honor belongs to the early Gnostics,<sup>22</sup> not the mainstream Christians. There are several early rabbinic sources that indicate the correctness of that assertion, but the most explicit of them is the following injunction, found in the *Mishnah*:

One who says "May the good ones bless you," this is the way of *minut* ([Megillah 4:9](#)).

As the Jerusalem Talmud elucidates, the clear implication of this passage is that the *min* believes in "two powers,"<sup>23</sup> one of which is evil and the other of which is good. This is clearly referring to a Jewish Gnostic; that is to say, a Jew who follows the teachings of the Gnostics.

Other early rabbinic sources also indicate that *min* refers to a Jewish Gnostic. In another passage, the *Mishnah* is concerned with the *minim* who believe that "there are many forces in heaven."<sup>24</sup> This statement would not make sense coming from a

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<sup>19</sup> [Shabbat 116a](#).

<sup>20</sup> [Bava Batra 25a](#).

<sup>21</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 9; Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, Book VII, ch. 7; Origen, *In Numeros Homilia V*.

<sup>22</sup> For our purposes, it is sufficient to say that Gnostics believe in a dualistic world wherein a God of light rules in heaven and a god of darkness (sometimes called a demiurge) rules the physical world. Thus, for the Gnostic,

physicality is seen as inherently bad and spirituality inherently good, as they each connect you to their respective God or god. In later Christian Gnostic thought (e.g., Marcionism), this divide can be represented by the God of the Old Testament (the god of darkness) and the God of the New Testament (the God of light).

<sup>23</sup> [y. Megillah 4:10](#).

<sup>24</sup> [Sanhedrin 4:5](#).

Jewish Christian; though a Christian may believe that God is Trinitarian, they affirm His essential oneness wholeheartedly. Only a pagan or a Gnostic could have uttered this statement, and it is inconceivable that the *Mishnah* would use so tame a term as *min* to describe a pagan.<sup>25</sup> Other, more obscure sources demonstrate the same. Twice, the *Mishnah* proscribes the dual recitation of “*modim, modim* (we give thanks; we give thanks)”<sup>26</sup> in one’s prayer because it sounds like they are praying to two different gods.<sup>27</sup> Though Abraham Cohen links this to Persian dualism,<sup>28</sup> we would expect a much firmer response to such acute idolatry, especially from the *Mishnah*. Hence, Gnostic dualism practiced by Jews seems like a far more fitting candidate for the source of the *Mishnah*’s concern.

Though we have not presented every available source for each position, the reader has likely realized that the view we are arguing for—namely, that the *min* is a Jewish Gnostic, rather than an atheist, Jewish Christian, or generic heretic—can hardly boast its quantity of sources, which is

roughly similar to those of the other views. However, those other positions are largely supported by later Talmudic and Midrashic traditions, whereas the Gnostic theory is primarily borne out from earlier Mishnaic sources. This indicates that the original definition of *min* was in line with our Gnostic theory, but that the meaning later evolved to one or all of the other options, in accordance with communal need. After all, Gnosticism largely faded from the public discourse sometime in the fifth century, about a century before the *Talmud* was completed. It seems quite reasonable that the Talmudic sages would appropriate this Mishnaic term for their own purposes, stripping away its archaic—and now meaningless—connotations and interpolating their own, more relevant, definitions in their place.

With all this in mind, we will now take another look at Maimonides’ description of the *min*:

Five individuals are described as *minim*:

a) one who says there is no God nor

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<sup>25</sup> Pagans are typically called “*ovedei kokhavim*,” those who serve stars, or else “*ovedei avodah zarah*,” those who practice foreign rites of worship. These are much more severe terms which connote actual idolatry, as opposed to “*minim*,” which simply connotes heresy. As we have previously shown, the word eventually develops to become the generic term for heresy of any kind (see note 13), so it is not inconceivable that, by the time the *Talmud* was completed, it was being used in that way as well. What we object to here is only the assertion that such connotation can be inferred from the *Mishnah*, a much earlier text.

Another factor that must be weighed is that sometimes words like ‘*min*’ or ‘*epikorus*’ or even ‘*kuthi*’ (Kuthite) were used in place of ‘Roman’ or ‘Christian’ so as to avoid censorship by those more dominant groups. See, e.g., [Pesahim 87b](#), where ‘*min*’ is clearly used in place of ‘Roman’.

<sup>26</sup> [Berakhot 5:3](#); [Megillah 4:9](#).

<sup>27</sup> See [Berakhot 33b](#); [Megillah 25a](#); [y. Megillah 4:10](#).

<sup>28</sup> Abraham Cohen, *The Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Berakhot* (2021) at 33b, note 14.

ruler of the world;

b) one who accepts the concept of a ruler, but maintains that there are two or more;

c) one who accepts that there is one Master [of the world], but maintains that He has a body or form;

d) one who maintains that He was not the sole First Being and Creator of all existence;

e) one who serves a star, constellation, or other entity so that it will serve as an intermediary between him and the eternal Lord...

Right away, we notice that no single definition can satisfy all of Maimonides' descriptors. For example, though a Jewish Christian may believe that God can take human form (c),<sup>29</sup> he would surely deny that He was not the sole Creator (d). Rather, Maimonides' list contains one or two heretical positions taken by *each* type of *min*. Thus, the atheist denies God's existence (a); the Christian denies His singularity (b)<sup>30</sup> and his formlessness (c); the pagan (a later definition of *min*) serves stars and constellations as intermediaries (e);<sup>31</sup> and the Gnostic maintains

that the Hebrew God was not the First Being and Creator of all existence (d).

### **Conclusion**

What we have observed over the course of this article is an evolution of terminology. It is important to stress that it is not theology that changed—that, for example, originally Gnosticism was problematic, then it became acceptable but Trinitarianism became taboo—but the meaning behind the terms. *Epikorus*, as we have shown, originally referred to Jewish adherents of Epicurean philosophy, *i.e.*, the Jews who subscribed to the tenets of Epicurean materialism. This was and is a repugnant heresy: the insistence on materialism characteristic of Epicureanism belies the supernaturalism at the heart of all revealed faiths, including Judaism. However, as Epicureanism faded into history, it no longer became necessary to reserve a term for them; hence, *epikorus* evolved to include all sorts of apostasies, including the denial of prophecy or Mosaic revelation.

Parallel to this, the definition of the term '*min*' also underwent an evolutionary process. Though it now refers to heresy in the most generic sense of the word, it once had a very specific connotation. Though several hypotheses have been presented, we have argued here that the term was originally intended to refer to Jewish Gnostics; that is, Jews

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<sup>29</sup> Incarnated within the person of Jesus

<sup>30</sup> In the eyes of the rabbis, at least. Much ink has been spilled attempting to demonstrate how the Trinity does not violate the doctrine of God's oneness, not least by the Church Fathers Hilary and Augustine, who each wrote

voluminous treatises on the subject. Whatever the case, the rabbis, by and large, were not convinced.

<sup>31</sup> This may also be a veiled reference to Christianity, because Christians view Jesus as an intermediary between man and God.

who subscribe to the Gnostic worldview. Over the course of the first few centuries CE, as Gnosticism faded and Christianity rose (and as Trinitarianism became the official doctrine of the Church after the Council of Nicea in 325 CE), the word was given new meaning to reflect the needs of the day. By the time of the Talmud's composition, few Jews were falling prey to the doctrines of Gnosticism, but Christianity—including Jewish Christianity—was in full bloom. It thus became necessary to adapt the rabbinic terminology to reflect these more relevant concerns. In the following centuries, as Christianity became a truly separate faith and willful conversions between Judaism and Christianity grew sparse, even this was no longer needed. Hence, *min* became the generic term for Jewish heretics, parallel to the use of *epikorus* for Jewish apostates. And, though it is these latter definitions which are reflected in the writings of Rambam, we have shown that the earlier meanings are preserved in the comments of the Sages.

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### **Holocaust Humor, Ethics, and Theological Protest**

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I once made a Holocaust joke. It was not intentional, and it was not planned, but I said it, and it landed as one.

A close friend of mine is the daughter of Holocaust survivors. Her mother, of blessed memory, was

not an easy person to grow up with. Much of that difficulty, my friend believed, traced back to what her parents endured in surviving the war. The aftereffects persisted well past 1945. They shaped the texture of my friend's childhood and the atmosphere of her home.

One day, as we were speaking about her mother and the strain that marked their relationship, she said quietly, "Well, you know, she was a survivor." Wanting to express sympathy, I responded, "Yeah, the Nazis really did a number on her."

There was a brief silence, and then she burst out laughing. It was not polite laughter, nor forced. It was immediate and surprised, and I found myself laughing too. The phrase I had used, so ordinary in other contexts, suddenly sounded painfully small. In the context of the Holocaust, it also carried an uncomfortable association with the numbers tattooed on prisoners in the camps. The idiom reduced something enormous into something ordinary. The dissonance between tone and reality was palpable. We both felt it.

What unsettled me afterward was not only that I had said it, but that it had provoked laughter at all. The moment felt transgressive and intimate at the same time. Why did that line, which should have been somber, land as humor? Why did her laughter feel both cathartic and faintly shameful? Who was permitted to laugh in that moment, and why? In the space of a single misplaced idiom, I found myself confronting the moral and theological tension that surrounds Holocaust humor. A Holocaust joke is never only a joke. It

carries questions about memory, authority, suffering, and power. The laughter it provokes does not resolve those questions – it sharpens them.

Some people respond to Holocaust humor by drawing a boundary around who is allowed to make such jokes. In this view, survivors and their families are permitted to use humor as a way of coping with trauma, but those outside of that circle should refrain from doing so. This instinct is understandable. The Holocaust is not just a historic event, but a legacy of inherited trauma passed from survivors to their descendents. However, the question of the propriety of Holocaust humor cannot be settled simply by identifying who is speaking.

Holocaust humor can be quite unstable. Whether such humor crosses a moral boundary is not merely a question of who is speaking, taste, comfort, or decorum. It operates as a moral-limit case, testing the boundaries of what feels ethically speakable. Some think that the Holocaust should resist ordinary modes of representation such as literature, poetry, or film, even though it has long been represented in each. Laughter seems to cross an even greater threshold. The discomfort it produces is not evidence that the conversation should end. It is part of the phenomenon itself. If Holocaust jokes provoke shame, anger, or unease, those reactions demand examination rather than dismissal. Even humor that feels wrong can expose

something about memory, trauma, and the ethical stakes of representation.

Most people assume that Holocaust jokes are distasteful at best and blatantly prejudiced and cruel at worst. Yet Jewish tradition does not treat laughter as simple or innocent. The first laughter in the Torah is not an exclamation of joy but one of astonishment. Abraham laughs when told that he and Sarah will bear a child in their old age.<sup>1</sup> Sarah laughs as well, but hers is quieter and edged with disbelief.<sup>2</sup> When God responds, it is Sarah's laughter that is questioned, not Abraham's. From the beginning, Jewish laughter carries tension. It can signal faith, irony, protest, or the inability to absorb what has been said. It is rarely neutral.

Regardless of the long history of Jewish laughter as a response to pain and disbelief, many people still believe that Holocaust jokes are categorically inappropriate, arguing that the unprecedented scale, horror, and nature of the event place it firmly beyond the reach of humor altogether. This argument makes sense: certain tragedies demand reverence, restraint and silence rather than laughter. However, blanket forbiddance does not account for the ongoing existence of Holocaust humor itself, from jokes told by prisoners and survivors to contemporary satire and stand-up comedy. If Holocaust jokes exist, and they clearly do, then a better question is not whether they should exist at all, but what they do. Humor is never neutral. It always has a target, even when

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<sup>1</sup> [Genesis 17:17](#).

<sup>2</sup> [Genesis 18:12–13](#).

that target is implicit. In contemporary terms, one might describe this as the difference between “punching down” and “punching up.” In the context of catastrophe, the direction of the joke matters. Humor that directs its force toward victims, or the powerless, risks reenacting the very dynamics of humiliation and erasure that made the violence possible. By contrast, humor that turns toward perpetrators, ideology, or even God does something different. It shifts the burden upward. It refuses to allow suffering to be the object of ridicule and instead makes power answerable. The distinction is not tidy, and there are gray areas, but the ethical direction of the joke shapes whether it functions as protest or as diminishment.

This distinction becomes visible when we look at humor that emerged during the Holocaust itself. Humor as a threat to Nazi authority came in different forms.<sup>3</sup> For example, one survivor spoke of the physical humiliation and degradation that accompanied the head shavings that occurred upon entry into many concentration camps. The experience was devastating and dehumanizing. She saw friends from her hometown, and they were weeping. Yet as she recalled it, she started to laugh, and said, “This I never had before! A hairdo for free?”<sup>4</sup> Her joke did not deny the horror of what happened – it depended on it. This woman reclaimed the very thing that was so brutally

inflicted upon her, and in doing so exposed the limits of Nazi power.

The autonomy preserved through humor – under conditions of total humiliation, pain and torture – points toward something more than psychological survival. Laughter during the Holocaust did not just help victims live on; it provided a moral stance in a world that no longer made sense either ethically or theologically. By using humor to deny the destruction happening to them, victims achieved a form of protest. It was not physical resistance or victory, but an insistence that they retained authority over how their own experiences would be interpreted.<sup>5</sup> This protest was not always directed solely at the Nazi regime. In a world where God appeared silent or absent, the act of laughing at catastrophe also raised theological questions about divine presence, responsibility, and abandonment. In this sense, humor did not explain suffering, but it refused to allow suffering the final word.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks initially expressed skepticism about the claim that humor could keep someone alive during the Holocaust. After one lecture, a survivor approached him and said plainly, “You are wrong,” before recounting how he and another prisoner in Auschwitz made a pact to find something each day to laugh about. Each night they shared it. “A sense of humour,” the

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<sup>3</sup> Whitney Carpenter, “Laughter in a Time of Tragedy: Examining Humor during the Holocaust,” *Denison Journal of Religion* 9 (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Emil L. Fackenheim, “Jewish Faith and the Holocaust,” in [A Holocaust Reader: Responses to the Nazi Extermination](#), ed. Michael L. Morgan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

survivor insisted, “kept me alive.” R. Sacks later reflected that he found such courage awe-inspiring. The exchange reinforces the claim that humor was experienced not merely as a coping mechanism, but as life-sustaining. It did not remove suffering, but it preserved a measure of agency within circumstances designed to strip it away.<sup>6</sup>

If humor could preserve life under conditions that seemed to defy meaning altogether, then it cannot be dismissed as trivial in the aftermath. Laughter in the camps was not denial; it was a refusal to surrender interpretation to catastrophe. That refusal carries forward. After the Holocaust, humor continues to raise questions that formal theology cannot easily answer.

A contemporary example shows how this tension persists after the Holocaust. Jewish comedian Alex Edelman tells a joke in which a Jewish man arrives in heaven, strikes up a conversation with God, and asks whether He would like to hear a joke. When God agrees, the man tells a Holocaust joke. God responds that He does not find it funny, to which the man replies, “I guess You had to be there, huh?”<sup>7</sup> This joke is deliberately uncomfortable, not because it trivializes the Holocaust, but because it redirects its force upward. The target of the joke is not the victims of the Holocaust, but

God Himself, specifically divine absence, silence, and moral authority. By placing God in the position of the one who “doesn’t get it,” the joke exposes the distance between the lived horror and any attempt to judge it from the outside. In doing so, the joke mirrors earlier uses of laughter as resistance, now aimed not at human perpetrators but at divine silence itself.

Edelman’s joke works through a simple but devastating piece of wordplay. When the man tells God, “I guess you had to be there, huh?” the punchline provides two functions. On the surface, it sounds like a familiar response to someone who doesn’t understand an inside joke – “you had to be there.” At the same time, it raises a far more serious question: “*Where were you, God, during the Holocaust?*” The pain in the question is real, despite the casual way it is phrased. The humor of the joke relies on its double meaning. God is positioned not only as someone who doesn’t “get” the joke, or has a poor sense of humor, but as someone to be implicated in the catastrophe itself. In this way, the joke does not merely offend or provoke; it makes a theological claim. It turns the language of casual explanation into an indictment of divine absence or abandonment. The joke does not resolve this tension, nor does it offer any meaning. Instead, it leaves the question

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<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “Happiness: A Jewish Perspective,” *Rabbi Sacks Legacy*, February 1, 2014, <https://rabbisacks.org/archive/happiness-a-jewish-perspective/>

<sup>7</sup> Alex Edelman, quoted in Andrew Silow-Carroll, “Alex Edelman and fans of ‘Long Story Short’ may disagree, but a

French intellectual says Jewish humor is dying,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, September 14, 2025, <https://www.jta.org/2025/09/14/ideas/alex-edelman-and-fans-of-long-story-short-may-disagree-but-a-french-intellectual-says-jewish-humor-is-dying>

open, using humor to articulate a challenge that theology itself cannot answer. It is a proverbial “mic drop” that comes from pain rather than triumph. The refusal to resolve the tension is not incidental. What that joke offers is not just irreverence, but a form of theological protest found in post-Holocaust humor.<sup>8</sup> After the Holocaust, traditional attempts to justify God’s goodness in the face of evil rang hollow for many survivors and theologians.<sup>9</sup> While this joke can be understood as a form of disbelief, it is really a way to articulate divine failure. The joke ignores age-old theological explanations (such as, “because of our sins, we were exiled from our land”) and instead replaces them with irony and unresolved protest.<sup>10</sup> To the creator of this joke, there is no consolation or explanation. There remains only the ability to protest and to insist that divine silence be confronted rather than justified.

It is important to state explicitly that not all Holocaust humor can be defended on ethical or interpretive grounds. Holocaust humor crosses an ethical boundary when it ignores the very features that once made such humor meaningful and morally defensible. As demonstrated earlier, humor during and after the Holocaust functioned as a form of resistance and moral questioning.

When humor instead targets victims rather than perpetrators, power, ideology, or God, it ceases to be a form of protest and begins to enter the realm of dehumanization. Similarly, humor that flattens the complexity of lived experience, or attempts to resolve tension through shock or insult, undermines the moral seriousness of the catastrophe. In these cases, humor no longer confronts devastation, but transforms it into a one-dimensional joke, shifting catastrophe from critique into spectacle.<sup>11</sup>

As Holocaust scholar Alvin Rosenfeld argues, one of the central dangers in contemporary Holocaust discourse is not silence, but trivialization: the emotional deadening of the catastrophe through repetition and cultural misuse. Some jokes punch so far down, reducing victims to numbers, bodies, or disposable matter, that they do not function as protest or theologically meaningful at all. Instead, they re-enact the very logic of dehumanization that made the genocide of the Holocaust possible in the first place. When Holocaust language loses its historical particularity and is used instead for shock, entertainment, or casual provocation, it no longer just unsettles ethically, but reinforces the very moral failure at stake. Humor that operates this way does not use subversion as a tool for

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<sup>8</sup> Avinoam Patt, “Laughter through Tears: Jewish Humor in the Aftermath of the Holocaust,” in [\*A Club of Their Own: Jewish Humorists and the Contemporary World\*](#), ed. Eli Lederhendler and Gabriel N. Finder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Dan Cohn-Sherbok, [\*Holocaust Theology: A Reader\*](#) (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Fackenheim, “Jewish Faith and the Holocaust.”

<sup>11</sup> Alvin H. Rosenfeld, [\*The End of the Holocaust\*](#) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011)

critique but erodes the meaning itself.<sup>12</sup>

Not all contemporary Holocaust humor operates this way. In one routine, stand-up comic Anthony Jeselnik jokes that his mother once denied the Holocaust and later “did a complete 180. Now she can’t believe it only happened once.”<sup>13</sup> The joke relies on escalation and shock. Its mechanism is inversion. The catastrophe itself becomes the punchline. Unlike humor that turns toward power or toward God, this joke does not challenge anyone or anything. It does not question the perpetrators. It does not question divine silence or moral responsibility. It crudely uses the Holocaust to make the audience gasp. The horror itself becomes the joke. The shock is the whole point. What once functioned as laughter in order to preserve dignity becomes laughter that risks eroding it.<sup>14</sup>

The line between protest and trivialization is not always clear. A different use of contemporary Holocaust humor appears in an episode of the television show *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, where a Holocaust survivor and a contestant from the reality television show *Survivor* find themselves, thanks to a misunderstanding of the term, at the same dinner party. The two begin competing over which “survivor” endured greater suffering during their respective experiences. The conversation went like this:

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<sup>12</sup> Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust*.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Jeselnik, “People Can Change,” Instagram video, May 5, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DJSC0ynRhcy/>

*Television Survivor*: Look, I’m saying —we spent forty-two days trying to survive, and we had very little rations, no snacks...

*Holocaust Survivor*: Snacks? What [sic] you talking, “snacks”? We didn’t eat sometimes for a week! For a month! We ate nothing!...

Like much of *Curb*, the scene trades in secondhand embarrassment. The discomfort is intentional. At first glance, it feels outrageous. The juxtaposition risks flattening incomparable suffering into a joke about semantics. It seems to trivialize the Holocaust by placing it beside reality television.

But the real target of the humor is not the survivor at all. The episode satirizes a culture that casually uses the language of catastrophe to describe inconvenience. By allowing the comparison to spiral into absurdity, the show exposes how easily Holocaust language can lose its specificity and become shorthand for personal grievance. The humor does not deny the Holocaust’s gravity; it reveals how later generations misunderstand it and misuse its language.

Returning to the accidental joke that opens this essay, what made the moment unsettling was not simply that it was funny, but that it was funny in a way that felt morally and theologically charged.

<sup>14</sup> Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust*.

The laughter it produced was neither innocent nor dismissive. It exposed a tension: who may joke, who may laugh, and what kind of meaning humor can bear in the shadow of catastrophe.

Holocaust humor cannot be evaluated only in terms of taste or offense. It forces contemporary society to confront the outer boundary of what can be said. During the Holocaust, laughter allowed victims to maintain a semblance of control in a world designed to strip them of dignity and meaning. After the Holocaust, humor can continue to function as protest when it directs its force toward power, ideology, or divine silence – rather than toward victims themselves.

At the same time, these distinctions are not absolute. Not every joke can be neatly divided into protest or trivialization. Intention does not guarantee moral effect, and gray areas remain. What Holocaust humor ultimately exposes is not resolution but the depth of the wound. Its discomfort reflects the ongoing struggle to speak about suffering without diminishing it, and to confront divine silence without explaining it away.

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### ***Love Bends the Line***

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**“A**havah mekalkalet et ha-shurah.”  
— [Bereishit Rabbah 55:8](#)

The sages used the above phrase “love bends the line” to describe Abraham’s actions before the *akeidah*: he rose early and saddled his donkey himself, driven by love for God, rather than waiting for a servant to saddle the donkey for him. Love, they observed, can pull a person off the straight line of rational or expected conduct, compelling an urgency or devotion that can look excessive from the outside. Yet this deviation is not chaos. It is what love looks like when it moves beyond calculation: still ordered, just not in straight lines.

There is intuitive truth in this image. Love resists neat boundaries; it can appear inconsistent or even unbalanced, yet its logic is never random. It reflects a different order, one grounded in attachment rather than analysis.

The Torah’s first description of love already suggests this tension. “It is not good for man to be alone” ([Genesis 2:18](#)) might sound like a utilitarian rationale—companionship as a remedy for isolation. But real love cannot be explained by utility alone. If it were merely functional, it would not matter whom one loved. Yet affection attaches to a particular person, not to the category of “spouse.” Love for a child or a parent may be natural, even expected—an extension of family and self. But spousal love is different. It is particular, chosen, and exclusive. We cannot justify our love by logic, nor persuade others to share it. Its truth lies in recognition rather than analysis. It is a logic born of attachment, not abstraction. This is the love the sages praise as *ahavah she’einah teluyah be-davar*—unconditional love ([Pirkei Avot 5:16](#)). Unlike

*ahavah she-teluyah be-davar*—contingent love—which lasts only as long as its reason, this love endures because it does not require justification. Its strength lies in freedom from utility, not in the usefulness of what it seeks.

The tension between love’s apparent irrationality and its inner coherence lies at the center of both human intimacy and religious faith. To love another person, or to love God, is to act beyond strict rational necessity, yet not without meaning. Love often feels unexplainable, but it is not arbitrary. It introduces a coherence that linear thought cannot fully contain.

Love’s logic is irrational but not absurd. An irrational number will not reduce to a simple ratio, but it is perfectly real and coherent within mathematics, even if it cannot be expressed as a fraction. The irrational defies calculation; the absurd defies coherence. Love belongs to the former: beyond reason, not against it. To call love irrational is to acknowledge that it cannot be derived or proven, only recognized—a truth felt rather than formulated.

### **Creation: Love Without Need**

Since God is whole and self-sufficient,<sup>1</sup> creation cannot be an act of necessity, such as a need to be sustained or served by His creatures. Jewish sources therefore often describe creation not as a response to a lack but as an overflow of *hesed*: generosity, or even love. In that light, the very existence of the world reflects the principle that love bends the line.

[Psalms 89:3](#) contains the evocative phrase *olam hesed yibaneh*, literally meaning “forever will kindness be built.” The Midrash<sup>2</sup> reinterprets the phrase to mean that the world is built on kindness.<sup>3</sup> The *Zohar* and later kabbalistic sources go further, framing creation itself as emerging from love.<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto offers a philosophical parallel, describing creation as the result of a divine desire to bestow goodness upon others.<sup>5</sup>

Classical Greek philosophy offers a useful point of comparison. For Aristotle, God is the “unmoved mover”: perfect and complete, untouched by the world, and not a being who chooses or acts within

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<sup>1</sup> See [Psalms 50:12](#).

<sup>2</sup> [Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael, Tractate Shirah 9:6](#); [Sifra, Kedoshim 11:11](#); [Midrash Tehillim 119:25](#).

<sup>3</sup> In biblical Hebrew, the word *olam* meant “eternity.” In the rabbinic period, it also gained the meaning “world.”

<sup>4</sup> [Zohar, Introduction 22:198](#); [Reshit Hokhmah, Sha’ar Ha-Ahavah 1:20](#).

<sup>5</sup> [Derekh Hashem Part 1, 2:1](#); [Da’at Tevunot 18:1](#).

it.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Plato describes a Creator who acted “because He was good” and wished to share His goodness.<sup>7</sup> Jewish tradition threads a path between those poles: it retains divine perfection while still speaking of creation as an act of giving, and it recasts that giving as love.

If creation stems from love rather than necessity, then *ahavah mekalkalet et ha-shurah* describes more than human emotion—it describes reality itself. The world is not inevitable; it exists because of love.

### **Ha-Levi: The Meaning of the Irrational**

Four prominent Jewish voices—Yehudah Ha-Levi, Maimonides, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein—each grapple with the same experience: love can look irrational from the outside and still feel coherent from within.

In the opening of the *Kuzari*, Ha-Levi rejects abstract philosophy. His objection is not that it lacks rigor but that it remains detached from lived experience. The God of Israel, by contrast, is known through history and revelation, not philosophical speculation ([Kuzari I:1–11](#)).

He makes the point by turning to examples that can look irrational from a purely logical point of view. Physical intimacy, for instance, could seem absurd to an observer unaware of its purpose ([Kuzari III:53](#)). But once its context and consequence are revealed, it becomes an act that

can lead to new life. The same is true, he continues, of the commandments. Practices such as sacrifices and other religious ceremonies can seem arbitrary from the outside, but understood as part of revelation, they are intelligible in a way that reason alone cannot provide.

Ha-Levi is not arguing that reason is useless. Rather, he is arguing that it cannot be the starting point. What looks irrational from the outside can make sense once it is seen as part of revelation, where meaning is expressed through loyalty and lived commitment, not deduced like a proof. In that setting, commitment comes first, and understanding follows.

### ***Ta’amei Ha-Mitzvot*: Commandments as Acts of Love**

If *mitzvot* are part of a relationship, then *ta’amei ha-mitzvot*—the reasons for the commandments—start to look different. Love does not need to be justified, and a relationship can come before understanding. Ha-Levi does not say this outright, but his framework makes room for it: meaning can be recognized from within a relationship before it is explained.

What would that look like in practice? When people talk about *ta’amei ha-mitzvot*, they usually mean one of two things. Either the *mitzvot* are meant to accomplish something—refine us morally, elevate us spiritually, strengthen society—or they are meant to train something:

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<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII.7.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Timaeus* 29e–30a.

submission, loyalty, the willingness to obey even without understanding why. The first approach is utilitarian, the second obedient. And they have long stood in tension, each accusing the other of missing the point—the utilitarianism of reducing divine service to human purpose, the obedience of draining it of meaning.

A classic rabbinic formulation gives a particularly sharp expression to the “obedient” model. The sages ask: “What difference does it make to the Holy One, blessed be He, whether one slaughters from the neck or from the nape?” They then answer: “The *mitzvot* were given only in order to refine human beings.”<sup>8</sup> In this view, the commandments are not justified by their outcomes or their intelligibility. Their purpose is formative. Through disciplined submission to divine instruction, a person is tempered and elevated. The *mitzvot* matter not because of what they accomplish, but by how they shape the person who does them.

Even so, both approaches tend to speak about *mitzvot* in the same basic way: in terms of what they do for us. Either they produce outcomes (moral, spiritual, or social), or they shape the kind of person we become. What is harder to hear in either model is the relationship itself. The *mitzvot* are treated as means to an end more than as actions between a person and God. But if we view *mitzvot* as part of a relationship, another possibility comes into view: they may be expressions of love.

I once heard an analogy from Rabbi Aharon Wexler that captures this well.<sup>9</sup> A man’s wife asks him to make the bed. To him, it seems pointless; no one else will see it, and it serves no function. Yet he does it anyway. Not because he understands why it matters. Not because he feels compelled. But because he loves her. The act may or may not have a reason behind it. What matters to him is that it matters to her. Love transforms the request into an act of care.

So too with the *mitzvot*. Some have clear reasons, while others remain inscrutable. But we fulfill them out of love for the One who commanded them. Whether or not they make sense, they are acts of relationship, not utility. When we fail, the loss is not procedural but personal—not disobedience alone but distance. And when we return, through *teshuvah*, we do not merely restore compliance; we restore connection.

In this model, *ta’amei ha-mitzvot* are no longer about what the commandments do for us nor merely about our willingness to obey. They are about what the commandments mean within a relationship. Their purpose is not utility or submission but love—a love that bends the line, because it acts for the beloved even when no clear rationale is in view.

### **Maimonides: From Intellect to Affection**

Ha-Levi located religious meaning in revelation and lived commitment rather than philosophical proof. Maimonides, though, reaches love by a

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<sup>8</sup> [Bereishit Rabbah 44:1](#); see also [Vayikra Rabbah 13:3](#).

<sup>9</sup> Personal communication to the author.

different route, through the very intellect Ha-Levi set aside. In [Hilkhot Teshuvah 10:3](#), Maimonides describes the ideal love of God as constant preoccupation, as though afflicted with lovesickness, unable to stop thinking about the beloved. The analogy is startling. This is Maimonides, after all—the philosopher known for rational moderation.<sup>10</sup> Yet Maimonides presents this passion not as a loss of reason but as its culmination: knowledge of God gives rise to love. The intellect, at its highest point, generates desire.

The psychological surprise in *Hilkhot Teshuvah* becomes a theological one in *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim*. There Maimonides sketches a story in which belief unfolds through human searching: Abraham comes to know God through reflection and inquiry. For much of the narrative, God appears passive, as human beings find their way back to the truth. But when Abraham’s descendants go down to Egypt and are drawn into its idolatrous culture, the story can no longer remain purely rational. Suddenly the tone shifts: “Out of His love for us ... He appointed Moses ... and sent him.”<sup>11</sup> At that moment of crisis, the passive God of the earlier story becomes active. He intervenes out of love and sends Moses to redeem Israel.

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<sup>10</sup> [Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot De’ot 1:3–5](#).

<sup>11</sup> [Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 1:3](#).

<sup>12</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, [Fear and Trembling](#), trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1983), 46.

This development does not follow Aristotelian logic. The unmoved mover neither chooses nor loves. It just *is*, and everything else desires it. Yet here, God acts out of love. Something shifts. The Aristotelian frame can carry the story only so far. Once you reach Egypt and redemption, it starts to strain. Maimonides—almost against his own grain—has to speak about divine initiative and benevolence. The narrative begins with human reasoning and ends with divine intervention. Maimonides frames that intervention as love.

### **Soloveitchik: Recognition Without Absurdity**

In the modern period, this discussion continues in a new form. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard defines faith as a leap “by virtue of the absurd,”<sup>12</sup> grounded in paradox and even contradiction. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (the Rav) agrees that faith is not founded on philosophical speculation but rejects Kierkegaard’s premise that faith rests on paradox. For him, faith is not built on contradiction but rather on recognition: the believer knows God through encounter, not through proof.

The Rav renders this idea vividly in his treatment of rational proofs for God’s existence. In both [The Lonely Man of Faith](#)<sup>13</sup> and [And from There You Shall Seek](#),<sup>14</sup> the Rav turns to concrete metaphors:

<sup>13</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, [The Lonely Man of Faith](#) (Doubleday, 1992), 52.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, [And from There You Shall Seek](#), trans. Naomi Goldblum (Ktav, 2008), 16.

Does a bride in her beloved's embrace need proof that he exists? Does a baby in its father's arms require evidence of his reality? These metaphors point to a form of knowledge that is direct and relational, not demonstrative. One who loves, or is loved, does not require validation through evidence. You do not reason your way into that kind of certainty. You live inside it.

For the Rav, this intimacy defines faith. The relationship between humanity and God is known from within, through the lived reality of encounter, not by external verification. Just as a lover does not need proof of love, nor does a child need evidence of a parent's presence, the faithful person does not rest faith on proofs. Love affirms itself through presence.

### **Lichtenstein: The Privacy of Love**

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein shifts the focus: from how faith is known to how faith is held. When Rabbi Haim Sabato pressed him to describe his personal faith, Lichtenstein demurred: "You ask me to talk about my belief in God? But that is man's Holy of Holies! His inner sanctum! His most intimate relationship!"<sup>15</sup> The point of the analogy is not mysticism. It is modesty: some things are not

meant to be shown. There are forms of intimacy that lose something when they are exhibited, and Lichtenstein suggests that faith belongs in that category.

There is a precedent for this way of speaking. Rabbi Akiva says of the biblical book *Shir Ha-Shirim*: "All the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies" ([m. Yadayim 3:5](#)). The claim is surprising because *Shir Ha-Shirim* is, on its surface, a love poem—full of longing, desire, and the language of human intimacy. One might think that this kind of speech would sit uneasily inside a canon of sacred texts. Rabbi Akiva argues the opposite: the language of love is not a lowering of holiness but its highest expression. And because that language is intimate, it must be read with reverence.

For Rabbi Lichtenstein, faith operates in the same register. Its truth is not something you demonstrate to an audience. It is something you hold close.

### **Conclusion**

The sages saw Abraham saddling his own donkey and called it love bending the line. Not chaos—just

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<sup>15</sup> Haim Sabato, *Seeking His Presence: Conversations with Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein*, trans. Binyamin Shalom (Yedioth Books, 2016), 13 and 351.

devotion that will not stay on the expected path.

We tend to trust the straight line: what is clean, rational, defensible. But the bent line may be closer to what is true when it comes to love. A world that exists without needing to. A life shaped by commands whose full reasons are not always available. A faith that stays private because some things lose their meaning when they are put on display.

Not everything that matters can be proven from the outside. Some of it can only be known from within, and then guarded. *Ahavah mekalkalet et ha-shurah*—love bends the line, outward in giving and inward in privacy.

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