

```
@article{goldman-kosher.by.design,  
  author = {David P. Goldman},  
  title = {Kosher by Design},  
  journal = {Tablet Magazine},  
  month = {Sept 14,},  
  year = {2010},  
  note = {goldman_2010.09.14_kosher.by.design_a.txt}  
}
```

[A few definitions]

Ashkenazic Hazzanim = traditional (European Orthodox) Musicians. Some Examples:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHGJSCOWJD8&feature=related>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivB_0cSJguY&feature=related

Chabad = orthodox Jewish sect, devoted to reconversion of Jews

Dasein = Lit. 'being-there', authentic existence for a human being

HaKodesh BaruchHu = 'The Holy One (Blessed be He)'

Hatzlacha = Good luck!

Torah im Derech Eretz = Being both Jewish and part of the world

ahavos Hashem = the love of God

ahavos Israel = the love of Israel (one's fellow Jews)

ahavos Torah = the love of the Torah

brit milah = circumcision ceremony

daven = to pray

davening = praying

derekh eretz = 'ways of the world'

g'mar chatima tova = 'May you be sealed in the Book of Life', i.e., greeting for the Day of Atonement

goy = Gentile, non-Jew

goyishe naches = Gentile pride and satisfaction

kashrut = Jewish dietary law

kol hakavod = 'way to go'

mitzvah = commandment in the Torah

mitzvot = plural of mitzvah

oy vey zmir = 'oh gosh'

shaila = what a disciple asks a sage

shekhinah = glory of God (such as described at the end of Exodus)

sine qua non = 'without which there is non'

tallit = Jewish prayer shawl

tefilah = ritual prayers

teshuva = repentance

tzadakah = giving charity

[On the author]

David P. Goldman is a senior editor at First Things magazine and the ``Spengler'' columnist for Asia Times Online.

[Text begin]

“Dad,” insisted my younger daughter, “we really must do something about this.” I was about to get the sort of talking-to we dreaded from our parents and dread even more from our children. We were going to talk about food.

Why didn't we eat at home the way her Hebrew School teachers had told her Jews should eat? And what did Jewish law have to do with her adolescent concern for the welfare of animals? The grandchild remembers what the son never learned, says a Yiddish proverb. “I wasn't raised that way,” I told my daughter. “I don't have a good answer. But here's something that might help.” We sat down together to read Michael Wyschogrod's essay “The Revenge of the Animals.”

That was before I met Michael in 2007 and well before I had the honor to edit his contributions to the monthly journal *First Things*. Lord Jonathan Sacks, the chief rabbi of Great Britain, told me that Wyschogrod had produced “the closest thing we have to a systematic theology.” Born in Berlin in 1928 to Hungarian-Jewish parents, Wyschogrod and his family escaped Nazi Germany in 1939, fleeing to New York, where he attended an Orthodox yeshiva, Torah Vodaath. He studied Talmud with the great Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, while writing a dissertation on Kierkegaard and Heidegger at Columbia University. He is one of the last of the great European-Jewish scholars who mastered both the Jewish religious sources and the corpus of Western philosophy. What mattered to me at the moment, though, was his little midrash on Genesis.

Kashrut is a stumbling block for modern Jews. Rational defenses of the dietary laws ring hollow---for example Maimonides' claim that kashrut promotes health (“Anyone who thinks that kosher food is healthy has never had Shabbat dinner at my mother's house,” said Harlan Wechsler, the rabbi at Congregation Or Zarua in Manhattan). I was too modern to observe mitzvot simply because the Torah said so---like the German-Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig, about whom I had published several essays, my attitude toward much of observance was, “Not yet.”

Rational argument about kashrut falls short, but I was ready to hear a biblical argument, especially now that my daughter had called me on the carpet. And so we read Wyschogrod's commentary together. Christians saw the serpent in the Garden of Eden as Satan, he began, but that never occurred to the rabbis of antiquity. The snake was only the cleverest animal of the many God made to try to keep man company, for, as it says in Genesis 2, “it is not good for man to

be alone." But "for Adam no fitting helper was found." And then God made Eve. "Only woman is the proper companion of man," Wyschogrod argued, but "animals are also companions although less than fully satisfactory ones."

"What does that have to do with eating animals?" my daughter interrupted. That was where Wyschogrod was heading. Genesis tells us that even if the animals are not as close to God as are we, neither are they so far from him. The Torah is the first document in history to evince concern for the welfare as well as the sentiments of animals; domestic animals must rest on the Sabbath, and an ox must be allowed to eat the grain that it threshes. To kill and eat them is a grave matter; we have no rational calculus by which to weigh the human requirement for nutrition against the trace of the divine in animal life. That is why Jews may consume meat only with supernatural sanction, under restrictions imposed by God himself. God, Wyschogrod offers as an afterthought, probably would prefer us to be vegetarians.

My daughter and I agreed that we would consume no more non-kosher meat, and we would separate it from dairy. Some months passed before it dawned on me that I had migrated to the inside of Judaism, rather than pressing my nose against the window and looking in. I did not take the leap of faith across the chasm toward Jewish observance, to be sure: I was pushed by a stern-faced 14-year-old. Still, the world felt different afterward: I ate meat less frequently, and with a sense of awe at the God who rules over life and death. First one does, then one understands. The hard part is to understand enough to start doing.

Judaism is a religion of the body, Wyschogrod teaches. God chose Abraham and his descendants in the flesh, and it is in the sanctification of the body of Israel that God finds a home on earth, he wrote in his masterwork *The Body of Faith*. In his most controversial argument, he draws a parallel between our belief that God's indwelling (*Shekhinah*) resides in the flesh-and-blood people of Israel, and the Christian idea of incarnation---the belief in "the indwelling of God in Israel by concentrating that indwelling in one Jew rather than leaving it diffused in the people of Jesus as a whole." This raised eyebrows in some parts of the Orthodox Jewish world, for the idea that something like incarnation is found in Judaism is an uncomfortable thought.

By the late 1980s, Wyschogrod had become an important figure in Jewish-Christian relations. Against the prevailing sentiment in the Orthodox world, he argued forcefully for a theological dialogue with Christians, not only because he respected his Christian

counterparts---above all the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth---but also because he believed that understanding the Christian belief in incarnation cast a clarifying light on the sanctity of the physical, bodily Jewish people. He became something of a cult figure among young Christian theologians, but he remained somewhat remote from the Orthodox Jewish mainstream. He is now appreciated as one of Orthodoxy's most important and original thinkers.

By uncovering this parallel between Judaism and Christianity, Wyschogrod drew the line of division all the more brightly. Christians believe that God was present in the flesh of a single Jew; Jews sanctify their flesh through the mitzvot. It is the act of sanctification, not the belief, that defines our practice. As Franz Rosenzweig said, Christians believe that Jesus rose from the dead, but they cannot know it for sure; but the existence of the people of Israel is a physical fact.

Jews who undertake a return to Jewish observance begin with a spiritual hunger and---if they succeed---arrive at the practice of Judaism. We do not return to Judaism from nowhere, but rather from the ambient Christian culture in which we live. The centrality of belief and the sovereignty of conscience are the hallmarks of this culture, and Jews who grew up at a distance from Judaism inevitably look at Judaism through a Christian lens.

Wo es sich christelt, da judelt es sich auch, in Heinrich Heine's word-play: It says more or less, ``Where Christians do something, Jews do the same," but with the onomatopoeic sense in German of ``tinkling" (_christeln_) versus ``doodling" (_judeln_). A rationalized rather than a lived Judaism comes down to doodling. Judaism that emphasizes ``ethical monotheism" against ``ritual observance," and rejects or qualifies the chosenness of Israel, really is mainline Protestantism with a tallis.

[[Heinrich Heine: ``Wie es sich christelt, so jüdet es sich," lit. ``as it tinkles so it doodles." One of the most famous German poets of the 19th century. Remembered for early Romanticism, lyric poetry (especially his descriptions of nature; some set to music by Schumann and Mendelssohn), and his later, delicate cynicism.]]

Judaism without commandments never made sense to me. If you observe the injunction to ``love thy neighbor as thyself" because it comes from God, why not also observe the commandment in the next verse not to wear cloth woven of two kinds of material? And if these don't come from God, where do they come from? No surviving school of philosophy claims to derive any system of ethics---let alone ``love thy neighbor"---from reason. Even if we think that ethics can be

deduced from reason, why do we need the Torah? Or if we believe that altruism is an evolutionary adaptation, why should ethics have anything to do with Judaism? If "love thy neighbor" is not a divine commandment, and if it is not a logical deduction, then what is it? For semi-affiliated Jews, it's the residue of a faith to which formerly observant Jews of an older generation have a sentimental attachment.

There is a great gulf fixed between "ethical monotheism" and traditional Jewish observance, which demands that we accept God's will rather than our own criteria of judgment. As Wyschogrod notes, just that was the sin of Eve and Adam, who ate the forbidden fruit in order to acquire autonomous knowledge of good and evil. Such knowledge is what the philosophers promised from Plato to Kant, but failed to deliver; philosophy walked out on ethics in the 19th century and never looked back.

The trouble is that Jews who grew up surrounded by Christian culture do not know any way to act except according to their own autonomous criteria of judgment, yet the exercise of autonomous choice undermines the spirit of Jewish observance. How do we get there from here? One answer is Chabad-style outreach: Just perform one mitzvah, then another. We won't harangue you; little by little, you'll get to like it. I respect this approach, but it would not have reached me.

Wyschogrod reaches out in a different way.

Conscience, he explains, is not historically a Jewish concept. Conscience can tell us to do precisely what we shouldn't. Christians place great emphasis on conscience, but that can lead to perverse results; he cites the dictate of St. Thomas Aquinas that if a man believes that "to omit fornication is a mortal sin, when he chooses not to fornicate, he sins mortally." The secular reading of conscience is even more troubling. Heidegger tells us that conscience has nothing to do with ethics in the first place; it is our inner voice telling us to be authentic (which might explain why Heidegger's Nazi party membership never troubled his conscience).

Judaism asks us to follow not our own conscience, but rather God's commandments. What makes us accept these commandments? In the past, Jews may have kept the commandments to conform to community standards, but this no longer can be the case when only a minority of Jews keep the mitzvot: "It is much more probable than ever before that a Jew who remains faithful to the covenant in this day and age is acting out of conscience instead of social conformity," Wyschogrod writes. "The Judaism of our day can no longer dispense with conscience as part of our theological arsenal."

The solution, Wyschogrod maintains, is to acquire a biblical conscience---and here he draws on Karl Barth, who taught direct engagement with revelation. Jews can bridge the chasm between autonomous choice and divine command ``by exposing conscience to those events and documents which constitute the record of Israel's relation with God." We cannot separate the Torah from our national life of the past 4,000 years and the lasting belief that God loved us and made us his inheritance. We answered that love by accepting the means God gave us to sanctify the quotidian, bodily life of Israel. The Jewish conscience, he argues, is ``developed by the tradition of revelation to which the people of Israel are witness and without which Jewish conscience is impoverished and isolated, cut off from its source of historic sustenance."

And that is why the little essay ``The Revenge of the Animals" gobsmacked me: It impressed upon me that the ``narrative" and the ``legislative" parts of the Bible, the ``ethical" and the ``ritual," the ineffable mystery of life and death and the rules of the kosher kitchen, all are woven into one seamless fabric. We stand in fear and trembling before the terrible mystery of death; our fate, said Solomon, is the same as the beasts', for all is vanity. In such matters, philosophical rationalizing leads to nonsense or madness---in the extreme case, to Peter Singer's infamous claim that a healthy pig has more right to life than a crippled human infant. Judaism instead provides a supernatural answer to the mystery: God gives us means to sanctify our physical life on earth and therewith the promise of eternal life.

Eating is more important than prayer, remarked Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. There is no direct instruction to pray in the Pentateuch, which tells us plainly, ``You shall eat before the Lord." It takes work to learn to daven, but it was harder for me to learn how to eat---to live like a Jew rather than just sound like one.

Sometime later, I worked up the courage to invite Michael to dinner. He chose kosher vegetarian.

[comment stream]

25 Responses to ``Kosher by Design" [edited]

shualah elisheva says:

Sep 14, 2010 at 8:23 AM

an excellent introduction to wyschogrod for the uninitiated. also,

very appropriate for yom kippur, with its themes of teshuva, tefilah, and tzedakah. eating, especially in today's factory-farmed market, can encompass all three.

kol hakavod.

Rabbi Goldie Milgram says:

Sep 14, 2010 at 12:47 PM

Thank you for this interesting and helpful reflection on the embodied living of a mitzvah-centered life.

Paul Golin says:

Sep 14, 2010 at 1:44 PM

Beautifully written, and if it works for you, great. But it still boils down to: ``Because God said so," and that doesn't work for me; it doesn't work for a lot of Jews; and it's not the only way to be Jewish---though those who abide by it seem to want to insist that it is indeed the only way to be Jewish.

``Judaism that emphasizes `ethical monotheism' against `ritual observance,' and rejects or qualifies the chosenness of Israel, really is mainline Protestantism with a tallis."

in other words:

``If you're not doing it my way, you're doing it wrong."

or really:

``you're a Goy."

It's great that you found God, really it is. But please don't pity me for not, or tell me I'm less than you, which is the subtext of your essay. You're saying the same things the Orthodox have been telling us non-Orthodox for 150 years, even though you do a better-than-usual job of couching it in fancy quotes and name-dropping.

There are lots of ways to be Jewish. I consider yours a valid expression of Judaism. Don't tell me mine isn't.

Scott E. says:

Sep 14, 2010 at 1:45 PM

`` And if these don't come from God, where do they come from?"
Really? You can't think of a single other source that a book of stories and rules written in a human language might have come from? Why don't you think it's logical to ``Love Thy Neighbor"? Judaism is not the only religion with such a tenet; in fact, I'm pretty sure you can find it in every religion, which makes a strong argument that it's based on a human need and supersedes any specific religion.

Allan Leicht says:

Sep 14, 2010 at 2:29 PM

It all comes down to, ``First one does, then one understands," from when we are infants until the day we leave the world and understand ultimately. And if you don't believe it from Torah, read the development of Stanislavsky, the evolution of theater, which is the model of all creativity.

Sidney says:

Sep 14, 2010 at 2:49 PM

Your article says, ``Christians place great emphasis on conscience," and it is difficult to tell whether you are speaking for yourself or quoting Wyschogrod. You contrast the Christian emphasis on conscience with a Jewish emphasis on obedience, and I believe this is a false contrast.

In the husk of Christendom, today is the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. Jesus tells his followers to take up their crosses and follow him. He says to them if they love him they will follow his commandments. His mother speaks rarely in the Gospel, but her primary instruction is clear and simple: ``Do whatever he tells you to do." Christians are called to a life of obedience to God. The Catholic Church teaches that one's conscience must be conformed to God's will. God's will is absolute and eternal. Any conscientious deviation is due to movement on the part of the human being, not on God's part.

The story of David and Uriah is the story of conscience run amok and finally restored to harmony with God's will. David stole a man's wife and had him killed, but when the prophet of God showed him what he had done, his conscience reconnected with God's will and led him to repent. And that is why David is the model king instead of Saul.

The fracturing in the Christian church is the return of the Original Sin of Adam and Eve: the presumption to know what God knows. It is much harder to obey.

Eli says:

Sep 14, 2010 at 2:49 PM

Oy vey zmir! Where to begin? Here are the parts that had me slapping my forehead:

``philosophy walked out on ethics in the 19th century and never looked back."---What a gross oversimplification. Religious hubris at its worst.

``yet the exercise of autonomous choice undermines the spirit of Jewish observance."---Only if you define the spirit of Jewish observance as a grand act of spiritual S&M.

``Heidegger tells us that conscience has nothing to do with ethics in the first place; it is our inner voice telling us to be authentic (which might explain why Heidegger's Nazi party membership never troubled his conscience)."---Total cheap shot. Or, as I like to call these sorts of remarks, a hit-and-run.

Substantively, Wyschogrod's idea that ``To kill and eat them is a grave matter; we have no rational calculus by which to weigh the human requirement for nutrition against the trace of the divine in animal life." is not really different than the idea that Jews eat Kosher because it's healthy. They are both rationalizations for a religious practice. But the real problem here is that Goldman fails to take on a situation in which there might be a conflict between what he derisively calls conscience and the Jewish tradition. Perhaps we should awaken our Biblical conscience by reading the passages regarding the genocide of the seven nations, or maybe just attend a Brit Milah. Kashrut is Little League. The ethical implications of following it are akin to patronizing a mafia-owned restaurant. Problematic, but not earth-shattering. The larger problem, of course, is the naive notion that there is an essential Judaism that can be accessed outside the hermeneutic circle.

Rabbi Gerald Weiss says:

Sep 14, 2010 at 3:01 PM

The ritual embodies the ethical, although that may not be readily apparent in ALL ritual practices. It is precisely as if the ``doing"

of a mitzvah having a built-in ethical value/component at its source IS the vehicle for the concretized transmission of that ethical value. All one has to do is look at Tzedakah, which means much more than money, to realize that the MITZVAH of giving/doing Tzedakah obligates everyone to exercise that ethical value in quite specific ways BECAUSE the doing is the embodiment of the value. Eating (or not eating) a certain way and certain foods is, for most people who take the time to pause a moment between picking up the food and placing it in one's mouth, a physical embodiment of the spiritual values of respect for life, disciplined restraint and a whole host of related values and ideas that are part of the process, including gratitude for the food we eat and a sensitivity towards those who don't have enough or any, and our need to partner with others in helping to bring about a more equitable distribution of the ample food God and the world produces). This, even more than the issue of the animals, is an embedded ethical value often overlooked in our fast/junk food society.

If anyone is looking for ethical content in the Jewish way of eating, I think they just might find it in many of our dietary laws, even in the separation of meat (dead) from milk (source of life and nourishment from the mother to her young). By separating the two poles of life and death when we prepare and eat our food, we come to realize that there is value and utility in each end of the life spectrum, and intuit that death (meat) can serve to nourish life, but that the two realms are mutually exclusive in that one is the diametric opposite of the other. It's a kind of a cosmic cyclical thing, is it not?

Brandon says:

Sep 14, 2010 at 3:23 PM

This is an excellent article, one of the reasons I keep coming back to Tablet Magazine. However, I too take issue with the notion that philosophy walked out on ethics in the 19th century. It is astounding to me that one so well versed in Jewish thinkers as well as the Western corpus would make such ``hit-and-run" comment, as Eli noted above. The 20th century has seen Michel Foucault, Jean-Luc Marion, Thomas Hurka (who is still writing), Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Jurgen Habermas, and of course, Emmanuel Levinas!

As for the cheap shot directed toward Heidegger---Heidegger's quest for the authenticity of Dasein is predicated on the acknowledgment that Dasein is a Being-in-the-world, and that worldhood itself is necessarily comprised of other beings. It is unnecessary and misleading to discuss the Heideggerian project as a venture into

metaphysical nuances---the fundamental question of Sein und Zeit is nothing more than a deeper analysis of the Aristotelian problem---``what is the meaning of the question of being." And while one could perhaps (albeit not easily) dismiss the ethical connotations of Sein und Zeit, it is certainly much more difficult to dismiss those overtones in later works such as The Essay on Technology, Poetry Language Thought, etc.

It is a good article, and the analysis of the Christian perspective with which unaffiliated Jews necessarily view Judaism is particularly apt, but the denigration of the Western philosophical tradition either conveys grave misunderstanding or intentional misrepresentation.

Richard Schwartz says:

Sep 14, 2010 at 7:24 PM

As president of Jewish Vegetarians of North America, I commend David Goldman for his thoughtful analysis. But I believe respectfully that he, like most people, is ignoring that the production and consumption of meat and other animal products violate basic Jewish mandates to preserve human health, treat animals with compassion, protect the environment, conserve natural resources and help hungry people and that animal-based diets and agriculture are causing an epidemic of diseases in the Jewish and other communities, and contributing significantly to climate change and other environmental problems that threaten all of humanity. I believe it is essential that the Jewish community address these issues to help shift our imperiled planet to a sustainable path.

For further information about Jewish teachings on vegetarianism, please see my over 140 articles and 25 podcasts and book ``Judaism and Vegetarianism" at JewishVeg.com/schwartz and please see our acclaimed documentary ``A Sacred Duty: Applying Jewish Values to Help Heal the World" at ASacredDuty.com.

laurie says:

Sep 14, 2010 at 8:48 PM

I too am always fascinated by the various philosophical thinkers that attempt to describe, analyze and otherwise explain the what and why of Judaism.

I would like to approach it from a very different angle ... one not swathed in higher philosophical discussion.

I would like to bring the conversation down to a level that I believe the average everyday Jew (if there is such a being) might be comfortable with, and in their level of ``comfortability (I made that word up), often say:

``Why bother? What's the point? Who cares? So what? I am not religious! I am a secular Jew. etc, etc, etc."

I don't believe that ``they" have reached this level of disconnect suddenly or that it happened in a vacuum. While it is undeniably true---in some cases, in spite of having been Jewishly educated ... they may come to these conclusions, in my humble opinion, many other factors factored in that had much more impact.

The generations of our youth that were exposed to American colleges far from home in the '60s particularly were of a time when the prevailing social beliefs were that the way to prove everyone is equal and the same was to become ``close buddies" (if you get my drift) and this opening up of our social circles would prove to the world that we were like everyone else. To be more open we needed to be more like. If we were to maintain certain traditions and rituals ... we would be setting ourselves up to be different and unlike.

If we attended schools far away from home ... certain amenities would not be available. That made being ``like" so much easier. No one was there to scrutinize, criticize or comment on who you were hanging out with---or what you were doing of Friday night---or who you were doing it with.

That generation born of the late 50's and 60's gave way to many courses on comparative religion, philosophy, great theological writers of many strands and backgrounds ... few with traditional Jewish component. We are the simply the offspring of these global parents.

Jon says:

Sep 14, 2010 at 9:42 PM

Some of the commentators' criticism is good; most of it is silly. But there's too much to address all of it. However, this one stands out:

``of course, Emmanuel Levinas!"

Anyone who's read a word of Levinas could tell you that Levinas is

PRECISELY the exception that proves the rule. Levinas specifically insists on a SUPER-RATIONAL basis for ethics; rationality, for Levinas, is totalizing, and thus a rational ethics is an oxymoron. Levinas, like Wyschogrod, finds the basis for ethics not in reason, but in revelation. And don't think it's a coincidence that both of them were products of Lithuanian Orthodoxy!

David Goldman says:

Sep 15, 2010 at 8:06 AM

Thanks to all for the thoughtful comments. I might have added, had space permitted, that Michael Wyschogrod's wife was the leading Levinas scholar Edith Wyschogrod. Sadly, Edith passed away last year. Were she here, she certainly would support Jon's comments regarding Levinas' super-rational foundation for ethics. Regarding Heidegger on conscience, I recommend Michael Wyschogrod's essay on the subject in "Abraham's Promise." Heidegger is a complex case; Michael contributed an essay on the problem of Heidegger's Nazi affiliation to First Things earlier this year which cuts him no slack, but understands Heidegger in a highly nuanced way. I should add that even Habermas has accepted the importance of religion as a foundation for ethics. Otherwise: Kant's categorical imperative is discredited; analytic philosophy has nothing to say on the subject; Richard Rorty concedes that philosophy cannot explain why we should be cruel; and Peter Singer's "utilitarian" ethics leads to monstrous conclusions.

I must stick to my guns on two controversial issues: the inseparability of the "ethical" from the "ritual" and the inability of philosophy to offer an ethics. The closest that philosophy comes to doing so is the "natural law" approach of Thomism, which argues that Revelation "perfects" nature. None of the comments above make reference to this. First Things, of course, is written mainly by Catholics, and many of my colleagues hold this view. Much as I respect their thinking, I cannot accept it; Aristotle thought it unethical not to expose infants with birth defects. The anthropologists tell us that an average of 40% of each generation of males died in tribal combat during 40,000 years of human pre-history.

The idea that the "ethical" commandments could be separated from the "ritual" begins with St. Paul, and no Jewish current accepted this until the advent of Reform Judaism in the 19th century. This is a Christian not a Jewish idea to which Jews accommodated.

LazerBeam says:

Sep 15, 2010 at 9:12 AM

So if I understand the thrust of the article correctly, if one bends one's will to God's will and follows all of God's laws in obedience to his design without question or doubt, the mind, body, and soul are reshaped and purified as a vessel for the manifestation of and communion with the holy spirit. (It is not clear whether the degree to which this occurs is proportional to the degree to which one has lived in accordance with God's laws or is an all or nothing relationship.) However, only the chosen people, the Jews, enjoy this privileged relationship with God, so a non-Jew who lives a righteous and pious life in accordance with all of God's laws will not be able to manifest and commune with the holy spirit.

I have an alternative formulation of Judaism that I proffer to stimulate further discussion and debate. God is One, and all are One with God. If you recognize the divine in yourself and everyone and everything else and act accordingly, you will please the Lord and manifest and commune with the holy spirit and vice versa. Jews who question in order to better understand the origin, meaning, and importance of God's laws please God, as Jacob pleased God by wrestling with an angel of the Lord. Conversely, a person who lives in blind obedience to God's laws without trying to understand their origin, meaning, or importance is not a righteous Jew but a self-righteous automaton who has abandoned his or her responsibilities to God and God's creations. The rest was garbled in transmission.

SollyT says:

Sep 16, 2010 at 1:45 AM

Mr. Goldman,

Thank you for bringing Michael Wyschogrod to the table of Jewish existence and practice. I would be grateful for a word from you on the topic of secular learning. You have explored mightily in God's world, from music and philosophy to finance and political economy, demographics and the sociology of paganism. Generally speaking, Torah im Derech Eretz is not an approach that is in high esteem in today's observant world. My shaila for you, if you don't mind, is whether this approach can be a first class citizen of the observant person's world (a la Hirsch), or only an indulgence. Speculating on this topic is a source of sadness for me, but I'm worried that this sadness may not be from G-d, but rather is a species of what you have written about vis Rosenzweig, i.e. the presentiment of the death associated with a path to nowhere. On the other hand, perhaps one should have courage.

G'mar Chatima Tova

David Goldman says:

Sep 16, 2010 at 11:01 AM

Dear SollyT,

Thanks for the kind words---g'mar chatimah tovah to you as well.

Somewhere Joseph Soloveitchik writes that whether one approaches the problem as Homo Religiosus or Homo Scientificus, one runs into exactly the sort of problems. There is a big debate about the ``derekh erez" part of the Rav's thinking. But his deep interest in science and philosophy (including Christian philosophers) makes clear how much he valued secular learning.

My thought, for what it's worth, is that there is a religious component even in the most abstract secular sort of thinking, such as mathematics. Goedel's religious motivations are inseparable from the way he asked questions, which of course is what leads to answers. Math is not a ``neutral" subject; in it we encounter from a distance the mind of HaKodesh BaruchHu who made heaven and earth with means of which we can perceive a trace, but never fully comprehend. This interplay of discovery and recognition of the limits of the scope of discovery has great religious significance.

So does music: what would davening be without music? But as I argued in an essay on sacred music in First Things last year, the manipulation of time in music is not a neutral matter but embodies a religious conception of time. Classical Western music is founded on the Christian notion of time; the great Ashkenazic Hazzanim used the same elements to create a different kind of music in ``Jewish time." I am working on that (slowly, because I know the classical side much better than Hazzanut).

As a young man my only sense of the sacred came from classical music; ultimately, I think it is goyische naches, but still a wonderful kind of goyischer naches which Jews should enjoy (and if they have the talent, perform in public)---but not worship.

If Michael Wyschogrod can say that learning about Christianity deepened his understanding of Judaism, how can we reject the idea that learning about Christian culture might deepen our own observance?

David Goldman says:

Sep 16, 2010 at 11:03 AM

LazerBeam,

You have given us a pithy summary of what generally is called Pantheism, the view that God is everywhere and in everything (which means that he is nowhere in particular). That surely is not a Jewish view; one finds Pantheism in many expressions throughout the world. HaKodesh Baruch Hu has a proper name.

S. Heilman says:

Sep 16, 2010 at 2:57 PM

Very nice piece and also a wonderful chance to re-read Wyschogrod. But Wyschogrod fails to explain why God seems to prefer barbecued meat, starting with Abel and on throughout the Bible. Are humans to be vegetarians who bring meat to God, for whom it is the preferred sacrifice?

Penina says:

Sep 17, 2010 at 4:06 PM

The Revenge of the Animals is and always will be, in my opinion, nothing more than presumptuous drivel, with an enormously healthy dose of rank hilarity. Opinions notwithstanding, I'm going to enjoy myself a nice cut of roasted chicken ...

millier canning says:

Sep 18, 2010 at 8:59 AM

Thank you for your thoughtful article. I'm a late comer to my Jewish heritage after many years as an Evangelical Christian. (long family story) I'm in the ``taking it all in" stage and am grateful to hear other's stories. Fortunately we all have the opportunity to learn, choose what works for us, and continue on our personal journey.

There are many things that don't make sense to me regarding laws of food. Makes me glad that I haven't eaten meat in 25 years and only have dairy in my morning coffee. ;>)

Thank you for sharing your story and a tiny part of your journey.

SollyT says:

Sep 18, 2010 at 10:57 PM

Miller,

What a journey! But your statement "fortunately, we all have the opportunity to ... choose what works for us" while undeniably true in the strictest sense, is nevertheless also descriptive of the "shopping model of religion", otherwise technically the "syncretic" model, i.e. "self-defined", in other words, more about the self than about God. My impression of Judaism is that the shopping model has not been as successful as the traditional "any color as long as it's black" model. These comment are not intended to reduce Judaism to a functionalism (i.e. a social construct which "works") which is to strip Judaism of any transcendent reality. In fact, an acquiescence to and engagement with the transcendent is probably a sine qua non of Judaism. Which is all a long way of saying that "choosing what works" is not a statement that one should make glibly. It's hard to go wrong with ahavos Hashem, ahavos Torah and ahavos Israel. Hatzlacha!

David Goldman says:

Sep 20, 2010 at 11:17 AM

Without presuming too much, it seems fair to say that the Maker of Heaven in his infinitude is so far above human comprehension that we can only know of him what he chooses to reveal. If we believe that there is only nature, and "God" is simply another word for the totality of nature, there is no problem; but a God who stands outside nature and created it can only be known through self-revelation. Either God revealed himself or he did not; either he descended to Mt. Sinai, or he did not. If he did, we have only the tradition of a faith-community through which to understand this revelation. No amount of academic Bible scholarship will replace that tradition. And that narrows down our personal choices considerably.

\end