

What Are We on Earth To Do? (A Little Essay on a Very Big Topic)

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(Translated from the French by Martin S. Cohen)

For the late Geneviève Grinfeld-Luque ל"י



Does existence itself bear meaning? Don't smile! The question may sound trivial, but is actually pivotal . . . and as inexhaustible as elusive. Still, because we are constantly making life choices rooted precisely in what we perceive to be the point of our existence, our personal philosophies end up mattering profoundly. The main point of this study is to focus the question of life's meaning by asking what it means specifically for a Jew to be committed to the goal of living a meaningful life. And I have an ancillary point as well: attempting to elucidate what Judaism has to teach about the reason for being will inevitably set us to wondering about the reason that Judaism itself exists and about what we may rationally posit as its essential, even perhaps its ultimate, purpose. Taken together, I think the answers to these two questions create a context for understanding the most basic distinction between the Jewish and Christian worldviews—and I hope to be able to explain cogently that distinction as well.

By admitting that there is indeed a God who created the universe, we oblige ourselves to begin our inquiry not by asking what we ourselves would like the point of existence to be, but rather what we can rationally

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suppose that God the Creator might have intended it to be. After all, God could have made a world in which all men and women would willingly serve as faithful and contented servants of the divine realm, a world in which each man and woman would be beatifically happy as a servant of God. Of course, this world we live in is nothing like that. We live instead in a “vale of tears” largely inhabited by insufferable, cruel people wholly uninterested in serving even the most elementary of God’s desires as set forth in Scripture.¹ This surely did not *have* to be; the fundamental challenge, then, is to ask: why did the Creator deem it reasonable to make this human ability to rebel against divine values a part of the palette of our capabilities, despite the calamitous consequences of such a decision? Or, to pose the same question in the language of philosophers: what could possibly have been the ultimate reason for freedom of will to have been made an inalienable feature of the human condition? And so we come to the simplest (and least simple) of all questions, the ones I wish formally to address here for my readers. What *could* the point of human existence possibly be? What *do* we exist on earth to do?

To attempt to sketch a comprehensive response, I suggest that we use as our drawing pad a passage by the great eighteenth-century Italian kabbalist Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (called Ramḥal) that I have come to consider one of the most forceful in all Jewish theological literature:

Before the souls of humanity descended into the world, they were dependent totally on our wholly praiseworthy God. Such divine beneficence, however, occasioned shame in those pre-descended souls, somewhat in the manner of poor individuals “who have no choice but to accept gifts of food from others, but who then feel humiliated to be seen by their benefactors”² . . . And [indeed, after humanity was created and set in place on earth], this was just how it was for [the first of] of God’s creatures, men and women who were compelled [to act] by the simple fact that they had no reality other than what came to them directly from the divine “root” to act according to pre-programmed principles. But it was the will of God that divine service become the part of human activity, and *that* required that the actions of human beings be freed from the burden of irresistible celestial influence. According to this plan, it was necessary that the supreme will [of God] grant a kind of autonomy

on earth that would enable human beings to act under their personal initiative and according to specific choices they were then able to make . . . and so it [is even today] when the soul, ready to descend into the world (and animate a new human life), is “sawed” off its divine source [and made wholly independent from it], thus becoming something wholly other than God. And, indeed, it is this disconnection from God’s radiance that vouchsafes to the “root” of humanity below [that is, to the souls of terrestrial men and women] a kind of force that permits the human being, by the virtue of being possessed of free will, to act in a wholly self-directed manner and absent any coercion from on high. It is this feature of human reality that lends to the human soul its value and its superiority over beings such as angels, whose activities are wholly celestially directed. As a result, this creates the possibility of the soul approaching its King [that is, its sovereign Maker] in the manner of a queen approaching her husband and, in so doing, stimulating the King to turn toward her in love. And thus is the soul the partner of God in the work of making the universe come alive and bringing it to its fullest flowering.³

What is Luzzatto saying here if not that free will, here defined as the capacity to act autonomously and intentionally, is the one truly essential part of the human condition? In Luzzatto’s view, every soul exists in a state of total dependence on God before it descends to earth, not unlike the way a pre-born fetus is wholly dependent on its mother for its sustenance, and thus for its very existence. The soul, according to Luzzatto, is then “sawed off” from its divine root and made autonomous, thus fully real, somewhat in the way the newborn becomes a fully independent being only when the umbilical cord is cut and it begins to breathe on its own. Although it was not with this specific metaphor that Luzzatto developed his reasoning further, it still behooves us to consider it carefully as the background to his thinking. The whole concept of being “sawed off” from the celestial root goes back to the language of the *midrash* regarding the primordial separation of Eve from Adam, conceived there not as a man giving up a single “rib” to a new creative venture, but as an androgyne giving up a full “side” of him/herself to the newly gendered creature that became Eve.⁴ In turn, this leads to a sense that each stage a couple passes through on the way to conjugal union may

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be analyzed mythologically as a step along the path that leads to the reunification of the once-integrated androgyne. Since God is imagined as the King of the universe, Luzzatto develops his metaphor along royal lines: it is the king who confers some part of his innate majesty on his spouse when he marries her, whereupon the impetus to act passes to the (newly royal) queen who must initiate sexual intimacy by offering herself to her husband. Nevertheless, it is the two of them together who attain the ultimate level of intimate union when the king, moved by his queen's willing initiatory gesture, turns finally to face her and thus also, simultaneously, to signal his willing intent to engage her sexually. The initial stages of courtship are also part of this metaphoric picture as the preparatory acts that only eventually bring about the "real" coupling that takes place on the nuptial couch—and these stages become as sacred as they are crucial. Luzzatto's text is clearly about the partnership between God and humanity in working together to complete the work of creation.

The originality of this hierarchization of romantic initiatives rests in the fact that it is wholly focused on an unexpected concept, that *dignity* is the major condition of mature love. Underlying this thesis, however, is an even more basic idea: the notion that love constrained by necessity or entered into under duress cannot be considered fully real. And taken together, both ideas yield the notion that God gave free will to humanity precisely so as to provide a reasonable context in which human beings may come both to love and to be loved. Indeed, the autonomy of the soul is an indispensable prerequisite for developing an awareness of otherness. Thus, Luzzatto's great lesson can be epitomized as the insight that, in order to love freely, the lover *must* be other than the beloved. Indeed, had humans been created with an indispensable drive to love the Creator, we would exist solely as some sort of ghostly extension of the Creator into the created world, as some kind of puppet or wind-up doll. And in such a case, God would truly have been alone in the world, possessed solely of an army of mechanical toys for company. Nor would (or could) God or humanity have known love in such a world, for robotic love is valueless precisely because it is a foregone conclusion, because it a pre-programmed necessity. But what does the concept of human dignity have to do with the pursuit of mature dialogic love? That is the question I want to answer, basing myself Luzzatto's timeless lesson.

Dignity and Charity

As noted above, Luzzatto qualified the soul's original status as basically one of humiliation, by describing it as a beggar who, to use the talmudic expression, "must eat at others' feasts." This formulation must be considered in light of the fact that Jewish ethics teaches us to be extremely sensitive to safeguarding the dignity of the needy. And this becomes a question of the greatest importance, in fact, precisely because life without dignity is deemed worthless. This idea comes through clearly in a different talmudic lesson:

Rabbi Natan bar Abba taught in the name of Rav: "The world is dark for those who depend for their meals on the generosity of others, as it is written, 'He wanders about seeking bread without knowing where he will find it; he knows that the day is indeed dark for him' (Job 15:23)." Rav H̄isda said: "More precisely, his life is no life."⁵

Maimonides, perhaps with Rav H̄isda's lesson in mind, constructed a ladder suggestive of the hierarchy of values that should guide charitable giving, in which the very highest rung embodies the effort to free another from having to depend on gifts of charity in the future:

There are eight degrees of charitable giving, one higher than the next. The most elevated of all, however, consists of offering assistance in the form of a loan or a gift to someone teetering on the verge of financial ruin, or by becoming the business partner of such a person, or by offering him work in such a way so as to free that individual from having to ask for assistance in the future. This is what the Torah means to command when it says, "You shall support the stranger or the temporary resident so that he [be able to] live with you" (Leviticus 25:35), which is to say: support him so that he not fall again into need and again be obliged to ask for help.⁶

Earlier support for Rambam's idea comes from the author of the *Avot D'rabbi Natan*, who wrote that partnership is precisely the finest offer to be made to the needy:

One who gives gifts of charity will know God's blessing. One who lends to the needy is behaving in an even finer way. But

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the one . . . who invites a needy individual to become a partner in business is the most praiseworthy of all.⁷

It might at first seem just a bit counterintuitive that it is deemed finer behavior to lend to the poor than simply to give the needy gifts that come without any strings attached. But the point is precisely that the distress of the poor individual compelled to ask for financial assistance should always be viewed fundamentally more as an issue of dignity than one of actual need. Indeed, there is surely more dignity inherent in the act of borrowing funds later to be paid back than in simply asking for an unearned gift.⁸ In fact, needy individuals will only truly feel (re)invested with dignity once they achieve financial independence and, as a result, can support themselves with their own resources. But, more to the point, this dignity will be fully achieved only when, as a final step, they can take some of their new wealth and use it to repay in some way at least some part of what was earlier given to them. When this kind of exchange turns into a stable situation, it becomes a real partnership between the (formerly) needy and the wealthy in a kind of healthy symbiosis in which each self-sustaining party demonstrates its own largesse by giving freely. In such a case, the resultant autonomy will soon turn into a kind of voluntary interdependence that establishes, then nourishes, a relationship founded on and rooted in dignity. This comes through clearly in a suggestive statement of the Zohar's which surely inspired Luzzatto:

The ninth precept is to watch over the poor and to provide them with their needs, as it is written, "Let us make the human in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1:29). [We may interpret as follows:] "Let us make the human" refers to an integrated being including the male and female. "In our image" refers to the rich. "After our likeness" refers to the poor, for the rich are from the male side and the poor from the female. Just as the male and the female act in cooperation by showing compassion to each other and by mutually exchanging benefits and kindnesses, so must rich and poor act in cooperation by bestowing gifts upon each other and by showing each other kindness.⁹

Symbolically, this means that the human being starts out stamped with only a shadowy version of the divine image and can thus reasonably be

described as spiritually impoverished.¹⁰ In order to reach the full “likeness” (*hiddamut*) of God, an individual has to exert him or herself, which is done by seeking dignity in one’s own life and by investing dignity in the lives of others. In kabbalistic terms, this is expressed with reference to gender, as the female dimension struggles to reach the same level of dignity as the male. In economic terms, this is the situation that pertains when the rich give to the poor and the formerly poor give from what they have newly acquired to their former benefactors. It is in this sense that providing another with the opportunity to create his or her personal dignity constitutes the apogee of charitable giving. And transposed to the key of theology, this means—at least within the context of Jewish thinking—that the quintessence of divine love toward human beings manifests itself not in the fact that God graciously hands out life (in both its time-bound and eternal versions) as an unearned gift to humanity below, but instead in the opportunity that God offers human beings to “earn” their existence by expressing their love for God with their own actions and in a fully dignified manner. Acquiring this dignity and then giving the same opportunity to others is the point of our existence. This is Luzzatto’s essential thesis and the concept I am hoping to elucidate fully in this essay.

The Merit of Being

Let us see now how the process of this kind of “constructed love”¹¹ finds expression in some traditional texts and consider their implications. The bone with the richest marrow comes to us in the form of a famous lesson taught in ancient times by Rabbi Akiva:

Beloved are human beings in that they were fashioned in the image [of God]. But [it was a mark of] additional love that it was made known to them that they had been so created, as it is said: “for in the divine image did God make humanity” (Genesis 9:6). Beloved are Israel in that they are called children of God. But [it was a mark of] additional love that was made known to them that they are so called, as it is said: “You are the children of the Eternal One, your God” (Deuteronomy 14:1). Beloved are Israel in that a desirable instrument was given to them. But [it was a mark of] additional love that it was

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made known to them that the desirable instrument [i.e., the Torah], wherewith the world had been created, was given to them, as it is said: “As I give you a good instruction, forsake not my Torah” (Proverbs 4:2).¹²

At first blush, the development in three different directions of the same theme of divine love seems just a bit redundant, but this is not really the case. To speak in Luzzatto’s voice, there is a basic degree of dignity accorded to the queen by the simple fact of her accession to the throne as the king’s wife, but she can—and should—go further than merely accepting what is unilaterally given to her. For Rabbi Akiva, this points to a universal truth: namely, that every individual is graciously, but only theoretically, elevated by virtue of his or her birth to the highest rung—that is, to the status of well-beloved of God—by virtue of having been created in the divine image, and this is also so on the national level.¹³ Such a unilateral gift, however, does not come entirely without strings attached. Indeed, the recipients of this gift are left with a kind of moral debt that somehow weighs them down at the same time that it elevates them formally. It is, therefore, more reasonably to be labeled a kind of “partial” dignity that places recipients in a precarious situation in which they risk being dragged not up but down by what they have received. Gifts received in potentiality, after all, can be possessed, but not truly savored. And embedded in the larger concept is the role each individual must play in activating, so to speak, the divine image present but initially unacknowledged. I wish to discuss this in more detail with respect to Rabbi Akiva’s third thought, about the gift of Torah, but first I wish to explore his second, critical lesson in more detail.

A bit of talmudic exegesis is based on the detail that the verb *va-yitzeir* (“fashioned”) at Genesis 2:7 (“And Eternal God fashioned the man. . .”) is written with the letter *yod* doubled.¹⁴ From this orthographical superfluity, our teachers deduced that, for all that the first man was created in the divine image, he was also created with two competing urges vying to animate his every move: one capable of leading him to life and the other to the renunciation of life, to death.¹⁵ The *Zohar* describes the positive, life-affirming urge that manifests itself in an individual at the beginning of life as a “poor child,” because “it has not [yet acquired] anything on its own.”¹⁶ In other words, the human being comes into the world naked not only literally but

figuratively as well, just like the needy in Luzzatto's parable. Will the individual eventually depart similarly "denuded" of all he or she possesses, thus humiliated by existence? That will depend entirely on the individual in question, on the specific way he or she will "fashion" his or her life. This is the point of the Israel's escape from Egyptian bondage, the story of people precipitously leaving the land of their enslavement with the "bread of poverty" on their backs as they head for Sinai. The tradition requires we tell that story at the *seder* meal by "beginning with misery and then concluding with praise,"¹⁷ thus signaling the participants' willingness to pass from accidental parentage to meaningful affiliation with the House of Israel, thus also their concomitant readiness to "choose life."¹⁸ In this way, individual human beings contribute meaningfully (albeit after the fact) to their own creation, and thus also to the establishment of their own redemptive futures featuring life eternal—and, eventually, to the salvation of the world. Born a "poor child", the individual has the capacity to become a "rich adult":

Who is rich? The one who rejoices in one's portion, as it is said: "When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy and it will be well with you" (Psalm 128:2). "You shall be happy"—in this world. "And it will be well with you"—in the World to Come.¹⁹

Stepping away from the usual interpretation of this dictum, I find Ben Zoma's famous lesson neither to be preaching stoical sobriety nor to be suggestive of the notion that true happiness requires the renunciation of profitable ambition in order to avoid frustration. The point, I believe, is something else entirely. In my opinion, the verse quoted clearly suggests that Ben Zoma understood "real" wealth, associated here with "real" bliss, to consist mainly of the ability to enjoy one's own "labor," that is to say, to find the ultimate satisfaction in one's own contribution to one's personal wellbeing.²⁰ Labor is thus the effort by means of which individual human beings may participate in their own creation and thus gain life in the hereafter in a fully dignified manner. Regarding this notion, the *Zohar H'adash* teaches as follows:

[Rabbi Shalom teaches that] the tension between the "good" and "evil" inclinations within the human breast exists to put

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individuals to the test so that the just among them, as opposed to the sinners, will acquire an advocacy [to put forward their case on high].²¹

Life on earth is a kind of probationary period. Striving against adversity is akin to taking the first steps on one's personal redemptive journey along the path of Abraham, called the lover of God.²² Every success provides a kind of "advocation" (*pithon peh*), a term borrowed from the language of the justice system, that heralds (to shift gears and speak in theological terms) the individual's "justification." The term reflects the effort of an individual to make him or herself into a just person, thus to *justify* his or her existence. As an added value, this justification constitutes the second of Luzzatto's degrees of dignity, that of the queen who voluntarily and of her own free will turns to the king. This is the human response to God's invitation to enter into the covenant.

Indeed, providing humanity with this powerful opportunity is the point of the third instance of divine predilection mentioned in the dictum of Rabbi Akiva cited above: that Israel's status as the beloved of God is suggested by the bestowal of the "desirable instrument," and that this instrument of redemption may be activated once we understand that wise fidelity to the Torah is equivalent to the fulfillment of divine desire. The following maxim of Rabbi Akiva appears to follow logically from the one cited above, thus to serve as the conclusion of his progression of ideas:

Everything is seen [by God], and free will is given. The world is judged mercifully, yet it is one's deeds that determine the actual verdict.²³

Concretely speaking, the performance of the commandments and the pursuit of good works serve as the appropriate human response to divine love—which truth we see reflected liturgically in the fact that the blessing that proclaims God to be the divine Lover of the people Israel is immediately followed by the recitation of the Sh'ma, the great confession of faith that includes the injunction "to love the Eternal your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might."²⁴ And it is precisely the *reciprocity* inherent in the human contribution that serves as the key to redemption, which point Scripture makes explicit in an adjacent passage:

And the Eternal commanded us to observe all these laws that we might come to fear the Eternal our God so that we know good all of our days, so that [God] always [continue to] grant us life as today. And so shall be our justification/righteousness (*u-tz'dakah tihyeh lanu*): to fulfill all these commandments before the Eternal our God, just as [God] has commanded us to do.²⁵

And this precise lesson is audibly echoed in the Mishnah:

Rabbi Ḥanania ben Akashia teaches: “The blessed Holy One wished to bestow *merit* on (*l'zakkot*) Israel and so gave them a multivalent Torah and many commandments, just as the prophet said: ‘The Eternal wished to establish his justice/righteousness and so created a complex Torah and then made it even mightier’ (Isaiah 42:21).”²⁶

But what exactly is the effect of this merit granted *in posse* by the bestowal of the desirable instrument? Devotion to Torah is a means of self-refinement, somewhat in the manner of a jeweler who creates a perfect diamond first by cutting away the flaws and then by polishing the stone that remains. This is the specific sense in which the rabbis used the term *z'kbut* (“merit”) in a well-known passage in which the performance of the commandments is compared to the work respectively of a goldsmith, an ironmonger, or a master glazier:²⁷ “Rav taught, ‘The commandments were only given (i.e., to humankind) as a means of purification . . . just as God forged Abraham (i.e., Abraham’s character) in the fiery furnace.’”²⁸ Similarly, Resh Lakish taught that “for those who merit it, God forges life.”²⁹ And such is one of the underlying meanings of the famous remark that “the reward for a commandment (observed) is the commandment (itself):”³⁰ the commandment itself forges the inmost self of the individual observing it, and this is so even if this alchemical brilliance, so to speak, is not readily visible to us in our earthly state. The secret herein revealed, then, is that human self-justification is also an act of adjustment and transfiguration, and the performance of a commandment is thus the human counterpart to God’s work of creation.

This notion of self-fashioning as the ultimate act of self-investiture with human dignity is key. To use the mystics’ language, individuals who fashion themselves in this manner do so by “manufacturing” themselves, by

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weaving for themselves a kind of glorious garment, a veritable “tunic of light” capable of transforming nakedness into dignified existence. This garment replicates the specific cloak that made Adam worthy of life itself by investing evidence of the divine origin of his soul in his very appearance.³¹ At the end of the day, all these metaphors—enrichment, advocacy, purification, and manufacture—point toward the same basic lesson: that the original purpose of creation itself was to invest in created humanity the opportunity to establish a mutual love relationship with the Creator founded in self-made dignity. Participating in the divine work by “co-creation” leads to not depending entirely on God’s creative efforts. And indeed, this kind of “ontogenesis” was also the lesson drawn in his own way by one of my teachers, the late Rabbi Léon Askénazi, who expressed himself in this regard in a truly remarkable passage in which the phrase Other-than-God refers to the created human being:³²

The history of the world is [merely] the story of the conquest by Other-than-God of his own essential being. This level of self-induced existence becomes authentic only when the individual in question acquires it through his or her own efforts. [And it also bears saying that existence must be deserved in order to be earned] . . . [In this light,] time itself becomes the mere framework in which this state of existential merit can be sought. The nothingness thus associated with the notion of creation [in that being *ipso facto* implies anterior nothingness] is the necessary realm that intervenes between the created world and God. Indeed, in order to acquire a meaningful measure of being, Other-than-God must emerge from nothingness . . . and time, therefore, becomes the internal dimension of God’s plan, also called the love of God, by virtue of which the Eternal One creates a context in which Other-than-God can exist. . . .³³

Earlier, this same lesson is suggested by a fabulous play on words preserved in *Vayikra Rabbah*:

“You shall keep My commandments and you shall perform them” (*otam*, Leviticus 26:3): Rabbi Ḥama bar Ḥanina interprets this verse in the following way. If you keep [the commandments of] the Torah, I shall behave as though you [*attem*] had

actually devised them [*otam*] yourselves.³⁴ Rabbi Akiva interprets the verse in this way: If you keep [the laws of] the Torah, I shall order the earth to bring forth many times its normal bounty, as it is written, “The earth will bring forth its bounty . . .” (Leviticus 26:4), or I shall bless both trees of the field and fruit-bearing trees in such a way that they bring forth far more than they normally ever would, as it is written, “. . . and the tree of the field will bring forth its fruit” (ibid.). For his part, Rabbi Ḥanina bar Papa interprets the verse as follows: If you keep [the laws of] the Torah, I will consider you as though you [*attem*] had made yourselves [*attem*]!³⁵

The Charity of Charity

Keeping the commandments is thus the ultimate act of self-definition. But the fact that the commandments are deemed universally beneficent should not be taken to imply that there is no hierarchy governing their relative worth. A verse from Proverbs points us in that very direction by asserting that “acting justly and equitably (*asoh tz’dakah u-mishpat*) is more desirable (i.e., to God) than sacrificing animals” (Proverbs 21:3). It sounds almost like a commonplace assertion, but the polysemy of the biblical term *tz’dakah*, once understood, points us in a different direction entirely. As already noted, the word *tz’dakah* denotes both the operation (i.e., acting with beneficence and/or charity) and the result (i.e., the generation of merit and self-justification), as indicated in the verse: “One who pursues *tz’dakah* and mercy will find life, *tz’dakah*, and dignity” (Proverbs 21:21).³⁶ Moreover, the dignity acquired by the one who performs the act of *tz’dakah* is all the greater and more redemptive precisely because of the dignity it generates for the recipient of that act, as illustrated in a charming *midrash*:

From Samuel too [we learn that] Israel is immune from astrological influence. For Samuel and Ablat [an astrologer] were sitting [and chatting] while certain people were going to a lake. Said Ablat to Samuel: “That man is going but will not return, [for] a snake will bite him and he will die.” “If he is an Israelite,” Samuel replied, “he will go and he will also return.” While they were sitting [and talking], the man went and returned, whereupon Ablat arose and, throwing open [the man’s knapsack],

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found a snake inside chopped into two pieces. Said Samuel to the man, “What did you do?” “Every day,” he answered, “we pool our bread and eat it. Today, however, one of us had no bread and he was ashamed. I said that I would go personally and collect [the bread], but when I came to him I only pretended to take [bread] from him so that he would not be ashamed. “You have done a *mitzvah*,” Samuel said to the man. And later Samuel went out and taught that the verse “*Tz’dakah* will deliver from death” (Proverbs 10:2, 11:4) does not refer to deliverance from an unnatural kind of death, but from death itself.³⁷

At its base, this midrashic story features the same “bread of shame” *topos* we have seen elsewhere regarding the humiliation of those who “must eat at others’ feasts,” but here the power of the redemptive act of charity that delivers from shame is explicitly associated with the triumph over pre-programmed death and, indeed, over death itself. In turn, this preoccupation with the dignity of others lends an unexpected echo to a celebrated lesson of Rabbi Akiva preserved in *B’reishit Rabbah*:

Rabbi Akiva teaches: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) constitutes the greatest principle of the Torah. Note that the Torah does not say, “Since I was humiliated, let it be just the same for my neighbor” or “Since I was insulted, let my neighbor be insulted as well.” Rabbi Tanḥuma says, “If you choose to behave in such a manner, know well whom you are actually insulting, for “God created humankind in the divine image” (Genesis 5:1).³⁸

Formulated positively, that lesson accords only all too well with the one preserved in the name of Rabbi Eliezer in which the latter teaches that one must “let the dignity of one’s neighbor ever be as dear to one as one’s own.”³⁹ This is hardly a simple platitude mouthed by an ancient sage; it is the one-line key to living human life in the shadow of God’s presence, thus encapsulating both life’s ultimate justification and a statement of its most basic *raison d’être*.

Indeed, the vivifying virtue of charitable acts is not confined to those who perform them, but also applies to the individuals who benefit from them . . . *if* they in turn are inspired to undertake their own acts of

tz'dakah. We saw previously that the highest level of fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *tz'dakah* is to give the opportunity to others to attain the fullest measure of human dignity by willing themselves too to behave charitably. Human *tz'dakah* thus resembles its divine counterpart and the effect is not merely reflexive but also distributive. In fact, by fashioning humanity in the divine image and by granting individual human beings the opportunity to provide dignity for others, God created the context in which men and women below may attain the highest level of “likeness” to the divine image in which they were historically, but not yet fully operationally, created. Moreover, the point is that this level of likeness can only be attained fully by facilitating its acquisition by others. In other words, for as long as our divine service consists merely of being obedient to ritual law, or even of providing help to others to remain similarly obedient, we remain at the first and most basic rung on the ladder of human dignity and piety, the level frankly (but not really disparagingly) called “the fear of God.” However, when charity enables us to imitate God by worrying purposefully about the dignity of others—and by struggling to grant those others the opportunity to attain such dignity *by themselves*, thus enabling them to pay it forward with their own deeds—then doing *tz'dakah* constitutes the real performance of the commandment to love one’s neighbor “as oneself.”⁴⁰ This is the charity of charity, the *hesed she-ba-hesed*, and as such it is the highest level of loving God to which any person can aspire.

Christians and Jews

And so we come to the third part of my agenda, the part regarding the concept of “justification” which, more than any other idea, separates Jews and Christians in terms of how they view the concept of salvation, and thus also in terms of how they explain the need for their own existences. I begin by framing the root concept that has formed the traditional basis for Christians’ opposition to Judaism and its interpretation of scriptural law as two questions with mutually exclusive answers. Does God redeem individual human beings because of the merit they have earned by virtue of their good deeds (and fulfilled commandments) and because of their repentance, which Judaism sees as the path to personal salvation? Or does God extend divine grace (and thus also forgiveness and salvation) to sinners in exchange for

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their mere faith (in God in general, but also more specifically in the redemptive power of Jesus), as taught by the apostle Paul?⁴¹ Within Christian circles themselves, the so-called Pelagian conception, according to which human merit is understood as an integral part of salvation, was considered a heresy from earliest times and it is still widely considered by most Christians to constitute inadmissible theology.⁴² Let me cite several paragraphs taken from the section labeled “Human Powerlessness and Sin in Relation to Justification” in an official text formulated together by Catholics and Lutherans in 1999 called “The Joint Declaration Regarding the Doctrine of Justification”:

19. We confess together that all persons depend *completely on the saving grace* of God for their salvation. The freedom they possess in relation to persons and the things of this world is no freedom in relation to salvation, for as sinners they stand under God’s judgment and are *incapable of turning by themselves to God to seek deliverance, of meriting their justification before God, or of attaining salvation by their own abilities*. Justification takes place solely by God’s grace. Because Catholics and Lutherans confess this together, it is true to say:
20. When Catholics say that persons “cooperate” in preparing for and accepting justification by consenting to God’s justifying action, they see such personal consent as itself an effect of grace, *not as an action arising from innate human abilities*.
21. According to Lutheran teaching, human beings are incapable of cooperating in their salvation, because as sinners they actively oppose God and His saving action. Lutherans do not deny that a person can reject the working of grace. When they emphasize that a person can only receive (mere passive) justification, they mean thereby *to exclude any possibility of contributing to one’s own justification*, but do not deny that believers are fully involved personally in their faith, which is effected by God’s Word.⁴³

These words could reasonably be said to be diametrically opposed to the opinion we have designated above as constituting the essence of Jewish theology, that is to say, the notion of striving to merit one’s own existence. It might be worth reading with just a bit more nuance, however. For one thing, the dichotomy, even when considered in light of Paul’s words, is not quite as absolute as one might think when viewed in the larger Christian

context. There are, for instance, other Christian sources that posit the existence of a kind of merit that can be imagined to complement the giving of absolute divine grace. And there are Jewish sources that suggest the necessity of a kind of divine grace that functions in a complementary way to an individual's personal merit.⁴⁴ Yet the line of demarcation separating the two doctrines can be seen the most clearly when keeping in mind the importance of Luzzatto's conception of God and humanity as partners in creation.

From the Jewish point of view, it makes no sense to imagine that an individual alone (e.g., Jesus) could possibly accomplish by him or herself what all of Israel, combined with a large part of humanity (or at least with the righteous Gentiles who are the *tzaddikei ummot ha-olam*),⁴⁵ are charged with accomplishing by undertaking their long journey through history. Nor does the concept of the messiah as a kind of *redemptor ex machina* who arrives to signal the end of history by proclaiming the forgiveness of all sins sit well with the Jewish conception of redemption. Indeed, the temptation to deny the need for sin to be remitted in the first place either by alibi (as encapsulated in the whiney lament that sin simply cannot be vanquished) or by proxy (as in Paul's lesson that sin can only be forgiven in the context of the sinner's proclamation of faith in Jesus) is quite strong. And behind this problem we can notice lurking the single, supremely profound reason for which, according to Jewish belief, the history of salvation, like the story of love, can never been a one-sided show in which God, working through the agency of the messiah, plays both God's own role and also the role of humanity in the drama of human redemption. Both human dignity and divine love require that the Redeemer and the redeemed play distinct roles in the soteriological drama. Indeed, it is God's personal sense of *tz'dakah* that prompts the assumption of this dignity by allowing the autonomous individual to construct him or herself sufficiently meaningfully to enter into a relationship we can qualify at least as reciprocal, if not really symmetrical—and thus wholly dignified. We could even argue that it is this delicate period of redemptive gestation prompted by human efforts that could (at least possibly) be interrupted, should the messiah arrive too early or act unilaterally.

But it would be a very different story were Christian theologians to imagine the messiah's intervention in human history as constituting solely

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the initial stage of redemption, the latter-day equivalent of God's gracious redemption of Israel "with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm" (Deuteronomy 26:8). This divine salvation was indeed mostly unilateral in its first stages in the Jewish conception as well, but that detail is dramatically overshadowed in the narrative by the fact that the whole point of liberating Israel from bondage in Egypt in the first place was to bring the nation into a covenantal process which was to require ongoing participation by both parties to the agreement. Viewing the matter from such a vantage point, the messiah in question can (by virtue of his wisdom and acts of redemptive justice) be conceptualized not as a mere actor simply playing the role of God in the cosmic drama of redemption, but rather as a kind of trainer inciting humanity to undertake the role every human being has the potential to fulfill by becoming, to use Luzzatto's borrowing of an originally talmudic turn of phrase, "a partner of God" in the accomplishment of divine will.⁴⁶

Thanks to a very careful reading of the Pauline corpus, this is precisely the orientation toward the issue that modern Christian thinkers have begun to consider. We can begin by considering words published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission regarding the Bible and the Jews:

The apostle [i.e., Paul] is (not) opposed to "works." He is only against the human pretension of saving oneself through the "works of the Law." He is not against works of faith—which, elsewhere, often coincide with the Law's content—works made possible by a life-giving union with Christ. On the contrary, he declares that "what matters" is "faith that works through love."⁴⁷

Technically speaking, the question worth asking has to do with the concept of "faith that works through love" (Greek: *pistis di agapes energumein*) mentioned by Paul at Galatians 5:6. How can the Christian theologian deal with this idea, which appears to denote a real autonomous action, when another Pauline verse comments that "God is at work in you, both to will and to work (*to thelein kai to energein*) for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13)? The *New Catechism* attempts to soften the harsh edge of the "truth that God is at work in all the actions of his creatures" by declaring: "Far from diminishing the creature's dignity, this truth enhances it."⁴⁸ For Jew-

ish readers, though, it remains unclear how this fits in with the words written by a follower of Paul that state that “. . . salvation does not come from you but is rather a gift of God; it does not come from works, for no one should glorify himself” (Ephesians 2:8–9). Nor is it obvious how this accords with the statement of the Joint Declaration quoted above in which it is observed that “when persons ‘cooperate’ with God’s justifying action, this [mere] consent is [in and of] itself an effect of grace, not an action arising from innate human abilities.”

The fact is that this kind of theorizing, which tends to dismiss the pageant of human endeavor as some sort of cosmic conveyor belt designed to deliver redemptive grace to the world, does not sit well with certain Christian theologians either. One of them, Jean-Noël Aletti, suggests that the most reasonable way to read Paul would be to see in his words a kind of *synergy* between the grace that operates in the baptized, on the one hand, and his or her own actions, on the other:

Taking its cue from the Lutherans, the *Joint Declaration Regarding the Doctrine of Justification* [by Catholics and Lutherans] appears to insist on the fact that God does all within the believer, who is left solely with his own ability to sin. But in fact Paul does not oppose activism or passivity: the “by faith alone” assertion [according to Luther] does not mean (for Paul) that the justified individual does nothing at all, because faith is both realized and activated by charity (Galatians 5:6). We need to bow to the evidence at hand: the actions of the baptized individual, as described in the apostle’s epistles, is effectively a real synergy, because the participation of the faithful individual is itself always a manifestation of [divine] grace. And this is the reason that Paul feels able to invite his readers to act for salvation: “Work for your salvation,” he says to them at Philippians 2:12. In other terms, I am obliged to ask myself, because of the ongoing contentiousness between Protestant and Catholic (and the final insistence on the origins of divine grace, on the absolute graciousness of a gift that does not come to anyone as a result of his or her merit), if the consequence of this was not to have forsaken and forgotten the purpose of this gift, *for God gives divine grace to the faithful so that the faithful individual might respond to divine will.*⁴⁹

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Without any doubt, this statement is significantly closer to the Jewish worldview. It surely allows us to argue that between these two “irreconcilable” positions—on the one hand, the extreme Christian notion of grace as simple amnesty granted solely as a reward for faith and, on the other, the extreme Jewish notion (so vocally denounced by Heschel) of election as intrinsically effective and nourished by a piety focused solely on meticulous gesture and rite—there may (and even must) be a middle ground where the two traditions can co-exist as rational opinions that need not be assumed to unavoidably negate each others’ inherent reasonability. And this middle ground has a name as well: it is the realm of reciprocal love between God and humanity in which the practice of charity (either as the performance of a commandment or, to use Christian terminology, as a “theological virtue”) leads to redemption by elevating the dignity of both partners.

The Dignity of God

Yes, that’s what I wrote: “by elevating the dignity of both partners,” by elevating the dignity level of the human *and* the Divine. This notion was put forth for consideration centuries ago by an anonymous author of part of the Zoharic corpus who suggested that the dignity of God is dependent on human deeds:

Rabbi Simeon said: “If things had happened differently and the blessed Holy One had not created the good inclination and the evil—which are light and shadow—there would have existed neither merit nor demerit for humanity in the created world. It was necessary, therefore, that humankind be created with these two inclinations. One verse in the Torah says this plainly: ‘Behold, I place before you today life and goodness, death and evil’ (Deuteronomy 30:15).”

His companions responded: “What is the point of such a lesson? Would it not have been far better had Adam not been created at all? In that event, he would neither have sinned nor set into motion all the various events that then ensued on high. Indeed, there would have been neither loss nor profit!” . . .

His response was as follows: “The Torah of creation is the garment of the Sh’khinah. Had the first human not been creat-

ed, the Sh'khinah would have been as naked as a pauper. Also, whoever commits a sin it is as though that person is depriving the Sh'khinah of her finery, and this too was Adam's punishment. On the other hand, whoever fulfills a commandment of the Torah, it is as though that person has dressed the Sh'khinah with its garment. Indeed, this is the reason one should think of one's *tallit* and *t'fillin* as 'real' garments: 'As they are his sole covering, the [only] garment for his skin: lacking it, under what will he sleep?' (Exodus 22:26). And if he is deprived of his garment, 'with whom shall he then sleep' while in exile? Behold, darkness is the black of [the letters of] the Torah and light is its white."⁵⁰

This text brings us back to a disconcerting talmudic passage that suggests that the price of existence is so high that it might have been better for God to forego creating the universe in the first place:

For two and a half years, the schools of Shammai and Hillel discussed the question of whether it would have been better for humanity not to have been created. [A vote was taken and] the school of Hillel garnered the most ballots, thus leading to the conclusion that it would indeed have been better for humanity not to have been created. But, they added, since humanity does exist, people should examine their own actions with the greatest care.⁵¹

What could this debate possibly have been about? Could one side seriously have meant to argue that it would be better for humanity never to have been created? Apparently, the answer is that that is precisely what they meant to argue, for a created world where neither charity nor love triumph is worthy of existence neither for God nor for humanity. Of course, the situation will be totally different once something is done to finalize creation by perfecting it. And it is this precise task that God assigned to humankind by offering them the possibility of becoming God's partners in the creation of their own best versions—and thus, concomitantly, also of the best version of the world itself. Thus, if humanity labors also to make it so, the world will have been, at least in retrospect, worth the effort of creating.

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But our kabbalistic text goes even further. *Ex post facto* justification of the world's creation with reference to the meritorious deeds of humanity does not only establish the reality of human dignity, but also the dignity of God. From reading Luzzatto, we have come to understand that the humiliation inherent in the human condition derives from the simple fact that humankind owes its very existence *solely* to the munificence of the Creator of Life. The text under consideration underlines the inherent indigence of God in the pre-redeemed world: the Sh'khinah is described as denuded and humiliated for as long as the Torah, serving in this myth as the divine garment, does not fulfill its original purpose of mediating between humankind and God by serving as the instrument that can (and will, at least eventually) bring about the redemption of the world. The late Charles Mopsik, my mentor and my friend, wrote:

A tradition of no doubt great antiquity teaches that, by doing the commandments and by doing good deeds, the faithful weave the garment of light that will cloak their own souls in the celestial realm. For [the author of the Hebrew book of Enoch], this garment can even be said to be fashioned for God when the faithful perform the commandments. And these divine garments are identified by the author as the angel Metatron.⁵²

The “Torah of Creation”—the covenant called into being to free the world from its state of suspended reality by obliging both humanity and God to work toward the same goal of making reality truly real—provides the sole means of egress leading out of this existential impasse. For in what sense could it possibly be considered dignified for God to have created a world of pre-programmed, mindless automatons whose faithfulness is entirely hard-wired, thus wholly non-optional? On the other hand, can we impute dignity to the Creator of an incomplete world in which human beings regularly abuse their freedom of will by choosing to sin? This is precisely what the verse in Genesis said long ago:

And the Eternal saw that the evil of humanity was great in the land and that the inclination of humankind's inmost thoughts was invariably towards evil. And so the Eternal came to regret

having created humanity in the first place and thus God's heart came to know remorse.⁵³

As long as human life on earth remains not fully viable, God is (so to speak) in debt to the righteous and personally responsible for having sent the human soul into too miserable a world. The dignity of God thus rests in winning the wager of creation, whereas the human being's dignity rests in taking up that challenge. God's dignity rests in justifying life already given, whereas the dignity of humanity rests in meriting life already received. This then is what we are on earth to do. The twin tasks relating to the infusion of dignity into the human condition, the one self-assigned by God and the other self-accepted by humanity, converge in the work of redemption traditionally mythologized as the weaving together of the garment of justice and mercy *l'khavod u-l'tifaret*, "for the glory and for the splendor" of God on high.⁵⁴ For it is somewhere within the woof and warp of this sacred cloth that rests the secret of God's presence in the world, and it is there that we must look for the synergy of gift and gratitude between God and humankind that has its counterpart in the embrace of lovers, as the ancient poet wrote, "Draw me to you and we shall run forward together" (Song of Songs 1:4). These words have been interpreted a thousand different ways, but for me they can only refer to the royal couple featured in Luzzatto's parable. And so, as I began by citing the words of our teacher, the holy Ramhal, so do I end: "As a result," he wrote, "this creates the possibility of the soul approaching the King who is its sovereign Maker in the manner of a queen approaching her husband and, in so doing, stimulating the king to turn toward her in love."

NOTES

1. The phrase "vale of tears" (*eimek ha-bakha*) is taken from Psalm 84:7.
2. See Y Orlah 1:3, 62b.
3. *Sefer Ha-k'lalim, K'lalim Rishonim (Book of Principles, First Principles)*, ed. H. Friedlander (B'nei-Brak, 1975), p. 277, *siman* 28. Louis Jacobs made a brief allusion to this parable in his *God, Torah, Israel* (London: Masorti Publications, 1999), p. 76, where he referred specifically to version of it in the *Sefer Kelah Pithei*

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Hokhmah, *k'lal* 4. In fact, Luzzatto evokes this motive, which Jacobs designates the *nahama di-k'sufa* (i.e., “bread of shame”) concept several times in his writings. As far as I can tell, this term appears only in later kabbalistic and hasidic sources. Jacobs probably seems to have learned it from his master, Rabbi E. E. Dessler (1881–1954); cf. L. Jacobs, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* (London and Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999), pp. 182–183. In his *Sefer Da-at T'vunot* (*Book of the Knowledge of Ideas*), §§1–42, the Ramhal gives an overall exposition of his theological doctrine in the form of a dialogue between the soul and the brain.

4. The author is making allusion to the well-known *midrash* based on Psalm 139:5 and preserved at *B'reishit Rabbah* 8:1. According to this text, the creation of woman involved her being “sawed” off the original androgyne, to which the verse from the psalm is imagined to allude. Just as the woman was “sawed” off of the original androgyne, Adam, so is Luzzatto imagining the soul about to born being “sawed” off its divine source and made into an independent being, instead of existing merely as an appendage of its divine Maker. It is, precisely, this act of having his feminine side “sawed” off that allows Adam to pass from “It is not good for man that he be alone” (Genesis 2:18) to “Therefore shall I fashion for him a helpmeet” (ibid.)—that is to say, from being related by mere juxtaposition (Luzzatto’s term elsewhere, borrowed from the *midrash*, is “back-to-back”) to the possibility of being related face-to-face, i.e. in a position designed to foster awareness of the kind of real otherness that in turn serves as the indispensable precondition for the future unity of the two. But this new position comes with its own risks of eventual tension between the lovers and the possibility of one partner overwhelming the other.

5. *BT* Beitzah 32b.

6. *MT* Hilkhhot Matt’not Aniyim 10:7.

7. *Avot D'rabbi Natan*, text A, chapter 41. See also *BT* Shabbat 63a, s.v. *gadol ha-malveh*.

8. See Rashi, *ad loc.*: “For the poor individual does not feel shamed in such a way.”

9. *Zohar* I 13b (Introduction).

10. In order to understand this piece of exegesis, we need first to note that the subject of the verse cited (Genesis 1:26) is in the plural (“Let *us* make man . . .”) and that this textual peculiarity can be supposed to correspond to the twofold nature of the subsequent divine declaration to create humanity both “in our image” and “after our likeness.” In the following verse, however, only the first goal is fulfilled and by God alone: “And God created the human in His own image.” This creates the exegetical opportunity to conclude that the second stage of creation, the one involving the likeness (as opposed to the image), was left undone during creation and must subsequently be undertaken by humanity.

11. I take the expression from the fourth of the seven nuptial blessings (“You who fashioned the human being in Your image, in an image resembling Your model, granting that human eternally viable existence”), in which the final clause literally reads: “granting the human a permanent construction (*binyan*).”

12. *M Avot* 3:18–19.

13. Akiva’s dictum also points to the peculiar truth that God’s love for Israel can be considered as more intimate than the relationship between God and the other nations precisely because of the added feature of parent/child intimacy embedded in it.

14. The word would be easily intelligible with a single *yod*. The doubling of the letter, not a problem grammatically or orthographically, is thus a handy peg upon which to hang a midrashic lesson.

15. *BT B’rakhot* 61a.

16. *Zohar* I 179b.

17. *M P’sahim* 3:4.

18. Cf. Deuteronomy 30:1.

19. *M Avot* 4:1 in the name of Ben Zoma.

20. I should be clear that the concept is not that wealth is being defined here as the key to self-sufficiency, much less to some sort of sublime autarchy, but merely as the elimination of one-sided dependence on others. The resultant interdependence yields fruitful symbiosis, not alienation. Moreover, both being generous and being needy thus play integral roles of the quest for human dignity.

21. *Zohar Hadash* I, B’reishit 29b. The deeds of the good inclination produce a kind of support before the supernal court by exposing the fine motives and superior moral bearing of the individual involved. The same idea is found in *M Avot* 4:13: “Rabbi Eliezer the son of Yaakov would say: One who fulfills one *mitzvah* acquires for oneself one [celestial] advocate; one who commits one transgression acquires against oneself one [celestial] accuser. Repentance and good deeds, however, form an effective shield against retaliation.”

22. Cf. Isaiah 41:8.

23. *M Avot* 3:19. Regarding the insight that the term *tzafui* does not mean “foreseen” (i.e., in the sense of “predicted with absolute certainty”) but simply “observed” (i.e., with watchful expectation), cf. Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages, Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Hebrew ed.; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978, pp. 229–230). It is only from Maimonides’ day on that this dictum begins to be interpreted as a kind of tentative reconciliation between divine foreknowledge and human free will. Cf. my book, *A la limite de Dieu* (Paris: Publisud, 1998), pp. 32–36.

24. Deuteronomy 6:5.

25. Deuteronomy 6:24–25.

26. *M Makkot* 3:16.

27. This latter comparison derives at least in part from the happy assonance of

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the Hebrew *z'khut* with *z'khukhit*, the word for glass or crystal. Cf. the parallelism between the verbal roots *zakhoh* and *tzadok* in Job 15:14 and 25:4. As Elena Cassin has written, “In most Semitic languages, the ideas conveyed by the root *zkh* have to do with being pure. But this notion involves another notion, namely, the concept of integrity. The comparison between the terms *zakhu* at Daniel 6:22 (23) and *betzidkatam* at Ezekiel 14:14 (which comes to the fore especially in the Septuagint), suggests a correspondence between the Hebrew *tzedakah* and the Aramaic *zakhu*” (*Le semblable et le différent, symbolisme du pouvoir dans le Proche-Orient ancien* [Paris: Ed. La Découverte, 1987], pp. 151–152). The term *zakat* in Quranic Arabic, usually translated as “charity” and always named as one of the five pillars of Islam, is tantamount to *tz'dakah*: “Take alms [*sadakah*] out of their property / you would cleanse them and purify them [*tu tabiru hum wa-tuzakihim*] . . .” (Quran IX,103, trans. Shakir).

28. *B'reishit Rabbah* 44:1. See already the biblical verses: “The refining pot tests silver and the furnace tests gold, but it is the Eternal who tests the [human] heart” (Proverbs 17:3) and similarly, “The refining pot tests silver and the furnace tests gold, but a person is judged according to one’s praise” (Proverbs 27:21).

29. *BT Yoma* 72b.

30. *M Avot* 4:2. The common interpretation is that the reward for finding the inner fortitude to obey one commandment is the resolve to undertake the observance of another. But other interpretations are also valid. Could Ben Azzai have possibly meant to suggest that the reward inherent in any commandment is the spiritual growth that a specific *mitzvah* has the power to exert on the individual who performs it? In the fourteenth century, Rabbeinu Bahya would have thought so; cf. his comment to *M Avot* 1:3: “Do not allow yourself to imagine that a commandment and the reward for its observance are two different things. They are one single thing, and that one thing is nothing other than the light that illumines the human soul and makes it worthy of existence in the World to Come” (*Kitvei Rabbeinu Bahya*, Commentary to *Avot*, ed. Chavel, Jerusalem, Mosad Harav Kook, 1970, p. 533).

31. The midrash is based on the assonance of the Hebrew word *or* meaning “leather” found at Genesis 3:21 (“And Eternal God made for the man and the woman tunics of leather [Hebrew: *or*] and dressed them in them”) and the similar word *or*, meaning “light.” (The former is written with an *ayin* and the latter with an *alef*.) Indeed, one text mysteriously alludes to a Torah scroll once in the possession of Rabbi Meir in which it actually was written that Adam and Eve were dressed in tunics made not of leather but of light; cf. *B'reishit Rabbah* 20:12, and also Louis Ginzberg’s *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1925), vol. 5, note 93, pp. 103–104. This luminous glory of the primordial garment—its true “richness”—was at first bestowed by God as a matter of divine grace, but could only be maintained subsequently in the context of allegiance

to God. And, indeed, it lost its luster in the wake of the first trial to which it was put, the test involving the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When Adam and Eve found themselves naked and ashamed, thus also spiritually “impoverished,” merit became the indispensable catalyst for “recovery.”

32. I myself have added the bracketed words to facilitate reading.

33. Léon Askénazi, “La Création” in *La parole et l’écrit* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), volume 1, pp. 158–159.

34. Written without a medial vowel, the Hebrew words *attem* and *otam* are spelled identically.

35. *Vayikra Rabbah* 35:7.

36. Interestingly, this same multiplicity of meanings was artfully used by the apostle Paul, who managed to capture its essence in Greek in a way that constitutes a kind of key to understanding his approach to the Christian faith: *tzedek* = justice = *dikaïosuneî*, *tzaddik* = just/justified = *dikaïos*, and *tz’dakah* = equity/justification = *dikaïôsis*, *dikaïoma*. For Paul, however, personal justification cannot be achieved through fulfillment of the Torah commandments, but solely through the grace of God.

37. *BT Shabbat* 156b.

38. *B’reishit Rabbah* 24:7.

39. *M Avot* 2:10.

40. In this sense, loving a neighbor “as oneself” implies loving the God whose likeness that neighbor bears.

41. Cf. Romans 3:25–27. By “faith,” Paul obviously means faith in Christ.

42. The so-called Pelagian heresy derives from the teachings of the monk Pelagius (350–420) who minimized the role of grace in the salvific process in favor of the concept of personal effort to bring to bear one’s natural free will in the exercise of virtue. Following the lead of St. Augustine, his philosophy was definitively condemned by the Church at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

43. *Joint Declaration Regarding the Doctrine of Justification* 4.1.19–21; emphasis added.

44. On the one hand, consider the “Jewish” lesson of Resh Lakish preserved in the Gemara at *BT Sukkah* 52b: “Every day an individual’s evil inclination grows ever stronger and eventually tries to kill him, as it is written, ‘The wicked one spies on the righteous individual, then tries to kill him’ (Psalm 37:32). Indeed, if God does not come to that person’s assistance, there could be no way to survive, as it is written, ‘The Eternal will not abandon him in the grasp of (the wicked one) nor will God condemn him in judgment’ (Psalm 37:33).” On the other hand, consider the “Christian” lesson of the Epistle of James (2:14–16, 20–24 with words I wish to emphasize in italics): “What [does it] profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be

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warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what [does it] profit? . . . But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that *faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?* And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’ And he was called the friend of God. You see then that *a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.*”

45. See: “How shall we interpret the verse ‘May Your priests be dressed in the garments of justice!’ (Psalm 132:9)? ‘Your priests’—these are the righteous among the peoples of the world (*tzaddikei ummot ha-olam*), because they are priests for God in this world” (*Yalkut Shimoni 2:429; Otzar Midrashim*, ed. Eisenstein, p. 486).

46. Cf., e.g., *BT Shabbat 119b*.

47. Pontifical Biblical Commission’s work, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 2001, chapter II, §45. The document is available on-line at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html.

48. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd edition, I.2.308, available in English on-line at: <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p1s2c1p4.htm#V>.

49. Jean-Noël Aletti, “Bible et dialogue œcuménique,” in *Bible et science des religions: Judaïsme, christianisme, islam*, eds. Françoise Mies and Jean Noël Aletti (Namur [Belgium]: Presses universitaires de Namur and Brussels: Editions Lessius, 2005), p. 142.

50. *Zohar Hadash, tikkunim*, p. 90a; cf. the translation into French of this passage by the late Charles Mopsik in the first volume of his French-language translation of the *Zohar* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1990), pp. 132–133.

51. *BT Eiruvin 13b*.

52. Mopsik wrote these words in his French-language introduction to his edition of the Hebrew Book of Enoch (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1989), p. 72. He makes it clear (in note 75) that in the Book of Revelation in the New Testament one can also find celestial Jerusalem described as a woman, in this case as the bride of the “lamb”: “It was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure, for the fine linen reifies the righteous deeds of the saints” (Revelations 19:8 in the Revised Standard Version). My translator, Martin S. Cohen, drew my attention to the fact that this garment of light is also the one in which God was enveloped while creating the world, as written: “You were swathed in light as in a garment; You stretched out the heavens like a curtain” (Psalm 104:2). The faithful, in fact, must attempt to weave such a (creation) cloak with righteous deeds alone, as suggested by the verse, “For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we shall see light” (Psalm 36:10). These verses are traditionally recited when the *tallit* is donned precisely to suggest the act as one

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of *imitatio Dei*. See Cohen's article, "The Tallit: Mystic Dimensions of the Garment," in *Conservative Judaism* 44:3 (Spring 1993), pp. 3–15.

53. Genesis 6:5–6.

54. Exodus 28:2 and 40; cf. Psalm 132:9.

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