והערב נא ה׳ אלוקינו את דברי תורתך בפינו . . .
Make sweet, O God, the words of your Torah in our mouths . . .
(Morning Prayer)

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Parts of chapter eight are reprinted from the *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, with the permission of the editor.[1]

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[1] Jerome Gellman, "On God, Suffering, and Theodical Individualism," *European Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 1 (2010): 187–191.

Forward

The Buddha once spoke of the right and wrong ways to grasp his teachings. He compared them to the right and wrong ways of catching a snake. He said that catching a snake by the tail is the wrong way to catch a snake. It will turn and bite you. You must catch a snake by the head so that it cannot turn and bite you. Even if it winds its tail around your arm it will not hurt you. The Buddha continued, if you grasp my teachings by the tail they will turn on you and hurt you. You must grasp my teachings from the head where they will benefit you (*Arittha Sutra)*.

In talking about catching a snake by the tail, the Buddha was referring to those who take up his teachings without realizing that the teachings point beyond themselves. When someone points to the moon, such people stare at the person's finger, rather than look at the moon. Those who grasp the teachings by the head, glance at the finger but know to look to the moon.

Truly, it was not until I began reading Hasidic texts that I knew that all along I had been clutching my Judaism by the tail. I had failed to understand that my Judaism was turning around and biting me. From the Hasidim I have learned to try not to be afraid to grasp my Judaism by the head, so that rather than hurt me it helps me go forward on this winding, uneven, uncharted trail called life.

And so, this book is informed by a broadly Hasidic way of thinking on topics in Jewish theology. I am grateful to the One who reads my heart for having provided me a way to understand that I was not to keep staring at the finger of my Judaism but was to go forward from there—all the way to the moon.

I dedicate this book to my grandchildren and great-grandchildren with a prayer that they will not be afraid to grab hold of the snake by its head.

Introduction

This is a book of apologetics for traditional Judaism. The term "apologetics" has a bad name for some because they are thinking of what I call "rejectionist apologetics"—that is, the defense of a faith by refusing *at all costs* to accept what would require modification of one's religion. While rejectionist apologetics can be honest and noble, it can also become infected with blatant dishonesty, a lack (sometimes intentional) of information, obvious fallacies, or a reasoning so convoluted as to be transparently ad hoc. There are other forms of apologetics. There is "forfeiting apologetics," as I will call it, which is eager to characterize the Jewish tradition as being identical—or almost identical—with current ideas hurled as challenges at that tradition. This happens, for example, when Jews allow "Judaism" to become another name for liberal, democratic values of freedom, equality, and ecology: Passover becomes a holiday of political freedom; Hanukah one of national self-determination; Sukkot and the fifteenth of Shevat are celebrations of nature; etc. "Forfeiting apologetics" succeeds by smoothly declaring that when the faith is *properly* cast, it looks *exactly* like its purportedly superior secular alternatives. Both rejectionist and identical apologists solve all problems for their devotees, each in its own way.

My apologetics for traditional Judaism is neither rejectionist nor forfeiting. I start with an acceptance of traditional Judaism, and judiciously inspect supposed threats or problems. When an apparent concern turns out to be merely speculative, for example, is primarily accepted for its innovative (perhaps rebellious) appeal, or is a popular fad, it can be dismissed as not being a proper threat in my apologetics. If the difficulty turns out to oppose the tradition arbitrarily, with little to back it up, or lack hard evidence or solid argumentation, it can also be rejected. However, when a supposed danger is found to be supported by rigorous thinking, strong moral judgment, persuasive concrete evidence, and/or exposes real internal difficulties to the faith, then it must be weighed as a reason for adjusting the tradition in its light, and to be ready to make the changes, albeit cautiously and perhaps reluctantly. In this case, I do what I call "vulnerable apologetics." It begins with the recognition that there can be places where apologetics might not succeed, and that the tradition requires review. However, a vulnerable apologetics will yield only when compelled by the power of evidence and argumentation. It will not yield to any of the other forms of criticism I list above—not to ideas because they are politically correct, merely popular, ill-argued, faddish, or simply based on a worldview at odds with traditional Judaism from the very start.

My book addresses, in the first instance, traditional Jewish devotees for whom the challenges I present are a test of their *emunah*, faith, and trust in God. They believe in the truth of traditional Judaism, or perhaps more commonly, believe that traditional Judaism is *true enough* to deserve their loyalty and devotion. Yet the issues of this book should be important for any Jew who believes in God, and for any theistic believer. My vulnerable apologetics deals with *real* difficulties for traditional Judaism in one of two ways: it either solves the issue by modifying the tradition, when necessary, and to the minimum possible extent; or it reduces the power of the problem to the point where its force will be diminished by the strength of a person's emunah, and faith can live with it, without a full solution, and in hope for better days.

With my vulnerable apologetics, in previous books, I found it necessary to offer a new conception of the Jews as the Chosen People.[1] I also found myself having to accept the widely held scholarly view that the Torah can no longer be thought to report historical events accurately, at least in the details. And so I proposed a theology of Torah and history that accounts for that fact, while retaining as much as possible of the tradition.[2]

The subject of this book is God—or more precisely, "the God of the Jews," YHVH of the Hebrew Bible and the rabbinic literature. My aim is to demonstrate that it is perfectly possible to be a devotee of traditional Judaism who, at the same time, accepts a moderate form of newly emerging Western morality. A devotee such as myself, who believes that God is a perfectly good being.

My opening chapter explains the basis of the theological method of the book, so the reader will know where I stand on matters of the "right" to believe in traditional Judaism and the "right" to make objective truth-claims.

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[1] Jerome Gellman, *God's Kindness Has Overwhelmed Us, A Contemporary Doctrine of the Jews as God's Chosen People* (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2012).

[2] Jerome Gellman, *This Was from God, A Contemporary Theology of Torah and History* (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2016).

In particular, I articulate why I do not accept a postmodernist conception of truth. This is crucial for the methodology of my project, and will help avoid later misunderstandings.

Chapter two elucidates what I mean by a "perfectly good being." I argue that to be perfectly good one must have maximal goodness, perfect power, perfect knowledge, exist always, be creator and sovereign of the world, and be in active relationship with the creation. As I will explain, what I mean by "perfect" does not include being omnipotent, omniscient, or unchanging.

Chapter three gathers selected sources from the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic writings that support, or point in the direction of, God's perfect goodness. These writings reveal a desire to see the God of the Jews, YHVH, as a perfectly good being. A major argument I present for God's perfect goodness is the biblical command to love Him unconditionally and absolutely. I propose that this command is religiously justified only if God is a perfectly good being.

In the following two chapters I take up two challenges to the idea that God is a perfectly good being. The first is the "ideological critique" of God's shortcomings, especially moral, as they are portrayed in the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature. In these texts, it seems that the God of the Jews is not perfectly good. The second challenge is the classic "argument from evil" that aims to show that no perfectly good being exists. If no perfectly good being exists, then the God of the Jews is not perfectly good.

The purpose of my book is to offer the person of faith support in the face of both the ideological critique of God and the argument of evil against the possibility that God is perfectly good. Do not expect from me solutions where none seem available. But I do hope that, for the kind of traditional Jew I am addressing, the scale is tipped toward belief in the perfect goodness of God.

Chapter four addresses the ideological critique of God—a critique that rests on how God appears in the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature. The ideological critique alleges that God has moral faults and other limitations. There are two issues involved in the ideological critique. One is a *practical issue*: how a contemporary Jew could live a traditional Jewish life *in the present*, while not seriously violating her contemporary moral sensibilities. Let us call this the "ideological critique of the present-day," or for short, the "present-day critique." The second is what I call the "ideological critique of history," or for short, the "history-critique." Even if the present-day critique is softened, the history-critique forcefully questions how a contemporary, traditional Jew can come to terms with the fact that, *so long ago*, the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature depicted God with apparent moral flaws. Only some of these flaws have been considered over time, gradually, while others have only become an issue now. How to account for why God has allowed this to happen if God is supposed to be perfectly good?

Chapter five presents the second moral challenge—the argument from evil. This argument wishes to conclude that the amount, and variety, of evil in our world precludes the possibility of the existence of a perfectly good being. The evil in question includes the evil pointed out by the history-critique concerning the representation of God in traditional Jewish texts. This is a problem that remains in full force even if we fully solve the present-day critique.

Chapter six is a response to the argument from evil, with what I call the "humility response." This response gives several reasons why we are not in a position to judge God morally. According to the humility response, both the argument from evil and the ideological critique cannot get off the ground. However, I contend that we must supplement the humility response with further considerations if we are to tip the balance away from the argument from evil to have sufficient faith to carry on, if belief in a perfectly good God is to remain true, or true enough for the believer. The chapter concludes with the first of my supplements to the humility response, the emphasis in traditional Judaism on gratitude to God for the good we experience in our lives.

Chapter seven offers a second supplement to the humility response by countering the present-day ideological critique. (I deal with the history-critique in a later chapter) In Jewish tradition, two major movements have radically reshaped the God of the Jews. These are found in Medieval Jewish philosophy and Hasidic thought as loosely based on the kabbalah. The former is particularly interested in making the God of the Jews a perfect God, *per se*. The latter, as I see it, wants to make the God of the Jews perfectly good. In the process of this reception within traditional Judaism of the God of the Jews, a specifically *Jewish* God emerges—one fashioned by the Jews. A believer should recognize the Hand of God in this development of Judaism, for the process of appropriation takes place with Divine guidance. (See chapter eight for my conception of Divine Providence.) Coinciding with our Jewish appropriation, God reveals more of the Divine to us. We must take care, however, to advance in this endeavor with humility and respect.

The past modifications of God fall short of what we need today. In this chapter, then, I propose the Hasidic way as a prototype for a contemporary, and continuing, Jewish appropriation of a perfectly good God. This type of modification promises further developments that have the potential to meet the present-day ideological critique with a suitable Jewish God.

Chapter eight picks up where the previous chapter leaves off and explores the Hasidic notion of "a portion of God from above," and its connection to the Hasidic idea of a perfectly good God. I call this Hasidic view "theological panpsychism," in allusion to the panpsychic principle that the mental pervades all created reality. Important philosophers and scientists have defended panpsychism, and I find instructive parallels between it and Hasidic doctrine. The chapter concludes by connecting the theme of "portion of God from above" to the earlier response to the present-day ideological critique.

Chapter nine introduces a further supplemental element to the humility response. This is a "possible theodicy" for much (but not all) of the world's evils which has application as well to the ideological history-critique. A theodicy tells a putatively true story justifying why a perfectly good God *allows* evils, while a possible theodicy tells a story only about why a perfect God might *possibly* allow evils. The purpose of a plain old theodicy is to give actual rationales for evil in a world where there is a perfect being. The purpose of a possible theodicy is to oppose the feeling that there could not possibly be any acceptable reason why a perfect God would allow the evil that we know. Given the humility response, any possible theodicy must be partial and humble in its claims. The chapter finishes by applying my possible theodicy to a response to the history-critique of God.

By the end of the book, I hope to have shown that a traditional Jew touched by modern moral sensibilities can believe in a perfectly good God, if: 1. She accepts that to a large degree God is beyond our ability to judge; 2. She accepts that an ongoing project of modifying the God of the Jews into a perfectly good Jewish God is an obligation to both God and ourselves; 3. She can picture to herself a reason why God might allow at least a good deal of the world's evil; 4. She is able to invoke her faith and trust in God for the problems that remain in diminished form.

Chapter One

My Theological Method

My mode of argumentation in this book goes back to when I completed high school at an Orthodox yeshiva school in Detroit, Michigan, and enrolled in a local university in the 1950s. The implicit message coming from high school was that I should study neither psychology or philosophy, as they are contrary to their Judaism. (Biblical studies were not even in the realm of possibility then.) So, naturally, I chose an undergraduate double major in psychology and philosophy, and went on to do a master's degree in philosophy with a secondary concentration in psychology. Finally, I got a doctorate and career in philosophy.

There I was in an undergraduate philosophy course and we were reading a 1952 edition of A. J. Ayer's big hit, *Language, Truth, and Logic*.[1] This work had become a leading text of logical positivism, a movement that preceded Ayer by many years. According to Ayer, and logical positivism, the words "God exists" were not only not true, but not even false. They were literally meaningless, like a bunch of squiggles on a paper. This view became so philosophically dominant that even some theologians began to embrace it and give up the belief that it was true that God exists. In time, some Christian theologians who abandoned God in that spirit—John Robertson, for example—became wildly popular.[2] I was in the middle of all of this and extremely worried about my religious future. Without God, there was no religion for me. What was I to do? The power of philosophy was so strong on me as an undergraduate student, in my rebellion against the very idea that I should not be studying philosophy, that I saw no way out.

One day, however, I suddenly realized that I had everything inside out. I had confused my epistemological "inside" with my epistemological

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[1] A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952).

[2] John Robertson, *Honest to God* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1963).

"outside." I had been thinking of my religious belief as my epistemological outside, in need of an inside evaluator, waiting to be invited in, and of my class on logical positivism as part of that inside. I thought my identity as a philosophy student was the vantage point from which to judge my identity as an Orthodox Jew. I realized that this did not have to be the case and, indeed, should not be the case. I was more certain of the core basics of my religion than I was of the argumentative solidity of the book before me.[3] I saw that my Judaism was the vantage point from which to judge the credentials of various outsides, including components of the philosophical enterprise. When I looked at Ayer's book in that way, I discovered that it had nothing solid to back it up and nothing to even *begin* to challenge God's existence. I correctly saw it to be no more than a current philosophical fashion—excitingly novel and rebellious, but little else. I came to understand that a requirement of any successful theory of semantic meaning ought to be that the words "God exists" be semantically meaningful. "God exists," that is, ought to be either true or false.

My decision to make my religion the arbiter of philosophy, however, put me in great danger. It invited pure dogmatism and could easily ensure that nothing in philosophy could ever overrule, or even help refine, any element of my religious belief. My stance could encourage defensive strategies invented solely for keeping the outside at arm's length—the worst of rejectionist apologetics. That is why I saw how important it was to adopt a consciously vulnerable apologetics, open from the start to the real possibility that components of my religious belief might be significantly weakened. Yet, at the same time, an apologetics that would not succumb to the merely popular or the thrill of rebellion against old values.

As a result, the theological method of this book is what I call "epistemological-framework conservatism." Just plain "epistemological conservatism" (without "framework") posits that if a person already holds a belief, then she is allowed to continue to hold that belief if she has no good reason to stop believing it. The idea behind this is that a person should not have to relinquish a belief she holds unless she finds a good reason to give it up. This is regardless of what grounds she has for her present belief.

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[3] Ludwig Wittgenstein comments on G. E. Moore's certainty that he has two hands, saying that this is not Moore's own certainty, but is a sign that Moore holds to the broad social belief that two hands are basic to life. Given that, it might be argued that my sureness here is not my own, but a function of the basic framework of my religious identification. However, that a certainty begins with a socially determined assumption need not imply that this does not also create an individual certainty or at least private confidence. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), inter alia.

Quite simply, plain epistemological conservatism is too permissive. Here is a good example of why it does not work:

> Suppose you flip a coin, and it lands out of my sight. Without going over to look, I decide that it has landed "tails" up. I do not believe the coin to be biased, nor do I believe myself telepathic. . . . I simply believe that the coin has landed "tails" up. Now, it seems to me that the fact that I now believe that it landed "tails" up does not justify me—in any measure at all—in maintaining my belief that it landed "tails" up. No belief about the orientation of the coin is justified in my present evidential situation.[4]

This is surely correct. That I happen in such a situation to *already* believe in "tails," is hardly a good reason to merit my continuing to have that belief. If I were to form the belief that it was *true* that the coin landed on tails, I would not be OK for even a moment in that belief.

However, epistemological-framework conservatism does not have that failing. This kind of conservatism applies only to beliefs that occur within a more or less demarcated structure or framework of intertwined beliefs, of which religious beliefs are an example. In the words of Kevin McCain, this type of epistemological conservatism accounts for

> a common intuition that when the need to revise our beliefs occurs we should try to revise our set of beliefs piece by piece instead of in totality. So, when we attempt to eliminate inconsistencies that arise in our set of beliefs as we come to form new beliefs we try to hold on to as many of our original beliefs as possible. . . . We are hesitant to do away with our beliefs because intuitively we think that holding a belief, while it does not count as evidence/reasons in favor of the belief, merits our retaining the belief until we have reasons to abandon it.[5]

The idea is that, if a belief is embedded in an extended structure of related beliefs, one is justified in continuing to maintain that belief until one has a good reason to reject it or suspend it.[6] The deeper a belief has penetrated the structure, the stronger a critique will have to be to dislodge it. In other words, the more other beliefs in the structure must be given up because of giving up some one belief, the greater the role played by that one belief in the belief structure. In that case, epistemological-framework conservatism mandates stronger counterargument before being obligated to give up that one belief. Beliefs at the edges of a structure of beliefs are more easily given up and so require weaker counterargument to dislodge them. In other words, we are not required to give up belief structures we already hold and start all over again from an epistemological limbo. (It is not even clear how this would be possible). Instead, my theological stance assumes the correctness of epistemological-framework conservatism.

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[4] David Christensen, "Conservatism in Epistemology," *Nous* 28 (1994): 74.

[5] Kevin McCain, "The Virtues of Epistemic Conservatism," *Synthese* 164 (2008): 187–188. McCain does not put his view in the same terms I do here, as epistemological-framework conservatism. Nevertheless, his reference to "sets of beliefs," and his later appeal to the "coherence" of one's beliefs, comes close to the view I am proposing.

[6] For decades, philosophers have been fighting like mad about what should happen when you realize that others who are as smart, well-informed, and seemingly honest as you think you are, have religious belief-frameworks inconsistent with yours. On the one side,

It follows from epistemological-framework conservatism that engaging in a self-protective strategy is not sinful when it aims to maintain a wider framework that is already in place. We should not dismiss self-protective strategies simply because they are defensive, but should judge them by how reasonable or unreasonable they are for the purpose at hand. Such judgments are hard to make. If one is unsympathetic to start with, one will tend to find a given self-protective strategy unreasonable or irrational. If one is sympathetic from the start, then one might be overeager to validate a given defensive strategy. Balanced judgment is called for, and even then, the possibility of disagreement is great.

This is why one should present one's self-protective strategies to readers, as I do in the pages that follow. Reader reactions enable one to see oneself from the point of view of others. Such exposure helps us to get closer, over time, to the truth. The development of competing defensive strategies is the most effective way to approach truth. Each strategist will, given her personal commitment, represent her standpoint as forcefully as she can, and through fierce competition truth has a chance to advance. This

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there are those philosophers who argue that this counts as a good reason to suspend your religious framework of belief or at least to keep it only tentatively; on the other are those who deny this is a good reason at all for making such changes in your beliefs. I belong to the latter group and have defended the position in a number of publications. Unfortunately, entry into this overgrown thicket lies beyond the scope of this volume. See my "Religious Diversity and the Epistemic Justification of Religious Belief," *Faith and Philosophy* 10, no. 3 (1993): 345–364, reprinted in *Philosophy of Religion, The Big Questions*, eds. Michael J. Murray and Eleonore Stump (Oxford, Blackwell: 1999), 441–453; "Epistemic Peer Conflict and Religious Belief," *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (1998): 229–235; "In Defense of a Contented Exclusivist," *Religious Studies* 36 (2000): 401–17; and "Jewish Chosenness and Religious Diversity—A Contemporary Approach," in *Religious Perspectives on Religious Diversity*, ed. Robert McKim (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 21–36.

is especially true for the standpoints of those at the periphery of society or of "proper" disciplines— which includes not only women and people of color, with which we are familiar, but all those ignored in mainstream epistemologies. Among these positions are those of traditional Jews whose religious views are hardly paradigms of what a theory of epistemology aims to preserve or legitimize. Traditional Jews' views can help serve as a corrective to narrowly construed populist epistemological biases.

Finally, and indeed most crucially, I take into account my personal relationship with God. I pray to God, and at times feel God's presence in my life. My theology is not merely between me and the reader. At its best, it must be consciously produced for God and with God. It would be a serious violation of my relationship with God to overlook the relationship in which my theology is embedded. I owe it to my relationship with God to be extra cautious. Augustine wrote of this caution in an extreme form when he said, "I will rather not be inquisitive than be separated from God."[7] I strive for what is called in Hebrew, *tmimut*. This word is hard to translate into English. It has the following meanings: being simple; uncomplicated; innocent; trusting; faithful, loyal; being whole; perfect without blemish; and being devoted. The concept of tmimut relates to one's personal relationship with God, as in Deuteronomy 18:13: "You shall be *tamim* with the Lord your God" ("tamim" being the adjectival form of "tmimut"). Granted this, a theistic believer should undertake any theological task in a prayerful mode—much as Anselm of Canterbury prayed to God for guidance when setting out to prove the existence of a being than which none greater could be conceived, namely, God.

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From my epistemological-framework conservatism, one might be tempted to conclude that since I say that different people are entitled to maintain different frameworks, I therefore must be giving up on truth. "It's all relative," one might say. That would be a mistake. Epistemological conservatism pertains only to what one is entitled to believe at any given time. It does not forfeit that a person may intend that what he believes is *true*, in an objective, metaphysical sense. What he is entitled to believe, then, is that what he already believes is true, unless shown otherwise.

My theology asserts the truth of God's existence, as well as of other components of traditional Judaism. In asserting the truth of God's existence,

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[7] Augustine, *The Morals of the Catholic Church*, trans. Richard Stothert (Seattle: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

I mean to say that to the statement "God exists" there corresponds a state of affairs that exists objectively and independently of the ways we might think about it or describe it. God is real. The meaning of "truth" when I ascribe it to the statement "God exists" means the same as when I ascribe "truth" to the statement "I am now sitting at my computer". In both cases, the truth is due to each statement faithfully recording something corresponding to reality. Of course, in the two cases the nature of the asserted reality is very different—God versus me and my computer—but the nature of the truth is the same: namely, correspondence-truth.

Now, there are three philosophical positions that challenge my conservative framework-epistemology and my correspondence-approach to truth that I feel the need to address here. These positions have somewhat of a broad following in certain intellectual circles, as well as some influence beyond those circles. These three are what I will call: the "expressionist objection"; the "nativity objection"; and the "postmodernist objection." I conclude that these, separately or together, do not give sufficient reason for me to change my mind about correspondence-truth and epistemological-framework conservatism.

The Expressionist Objection

The *expressionist* objects to the very idea that in endorsing religious beliefs one intends to make factual claims. A classic statement of this position was given by R. B. Braithwaite and is worth looking at in detail.[8] Braithwaite based his position on a general philosophical view (the "verification principle," beloved by Ayer) which almost all philosophers have since abandoned. That need not interest us here since I am more interested in the viability of expressionism itself than in its historical roots. Here are sample quotations from Braithwaite to give you the gist of his expressionism:

1. "[A] religious assertion is used to express an attitude. . . . It is not used to assert the proposition that [one] has the attitude; it is used to show forth or evince [an] attitude." (78)
2. "[Religious assertions are] primarily declarations of adherence to a policy of action, declarations of commitment to a way of life." (80)

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[8] R. B. Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief," in *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Basil Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1971), 72–91.

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