

SHARING WISDOM

A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

MEIR SENDOR

What is Wisdom?

Jewish texts and thinkers, when expressing themselves technically, distinguish between wisdom and revelation and make corresponding distinctions between what is appropriate for sharing between Jews and those outside the Jewish community and what is not. The foundation of Jewish tradition is divine revelation, cognitive content communicated directly from God to human beings. Transmitted prophetically, this content comprises the legal, moral and spiritual substance of Torah and the prophetic tradition, and issuing from God it is inherently true and transcendently wise. Wisdom, by contrast, is regarded as an essentially human activity, the effort to process divine revelation with human experience, to understand the world and human existence, though this effort itself can be divinely inspired.¹

While this distinction is implicit in certain biblical texts,² it begins to come more sharply into relief in rabbinic texts of the Talmudic period, where the further distinction is made between “the wisdom of Israel” and “the wisdom of the nations.”³ Medieval Jewish thinkers elaborate on the distinction between “the wisdom of the Torah,” the result of interpreting the divine revelation of Torah and correlating it with life experience, and “other wisdoms” which result from the general human effort to understand the world, human existence and the horizons of human consciousness.⁴ It is in this category of “other wisdoms,” also classified as “external wisdoms,” that some traditional Jewish thinkers find common ground and a basis for mutual sharing between Jews and non-Jewish

cultures.⁵ Torah and “the wisdom of Torah” are regarded as an exclusively Jewish preserve,⁶ and whatever limited cross-cultural sharing of this truth and wisdom may occur is strictly one way, from Jews to non-Jews.⁷

Behold I have taught you statutes and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, to do accordingly in the midst of the land that you are going to, to inherit. Observe them and do them, for it is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations, who will hear all these statutes and say: surely a wise and understanding people is this great nation. (Deut. 4:5, 6)

Note: Medieval commentators such as Rashi and R. Avraham Ibn Ezra take this passage broadly: that the wisdom of the statutes and laws of the Torah will be apparent to other nations and admired by them. These verses, taken in their plain sense, indicate an expectation of some communication between Jews and non-Jews on issues of law and religion, and a polemical concern to foster a positive attitude among non-Jews towards Jews and Jewish wisdom.

In the Talmud tractate Shabbat 75a, that which is considered wisdom in the eyes of the nations is defined narrowly and concretely, as astronomical calculations for the sake of setting the calendar, or for predicting the weather (Rashi, loc. cit.). This kind of specificity in interpretation is characteristic of talmudic discussions, and is not always to be construed strictly. Rather, the specific identification is in certain instances meant to be exemplary, sometimes for homiletic purposes. Here, the exhortatory thrust of the statement is to encourage Jews to value, cultivate and utilize this socially important skill. The implication is that this is an example of a technical skill set with legal and scientific ramifications, whose value also happens to translate outside a Jewish religious context. Astronomical wisdom of Jews can be admired by non-Jews because it is religiously neutral, involving the objective observation of nature, something that can be shared across religious cultures.

Jewish tradition has another way of speaking about wisdom, not as cognitive content, but as an intellectual posture. In the Mishnah tractate Avot 4:1 “Ben Zoma says, ‘Who is wise? One who learns from every human being.’” The statement is intentionally ironic. One expects the wise person to be defined as someone in possession of a substantial repertoire of knowledge. Ben Zoma’s point is that wisdom is actually an attitude, a broad and self-effacing openness to learning and receiving insight from everyone – not just from Jews or sages, but from “every human being.” Rabbenu Jonah Gerondi (1200-1263) develops this theme of wisdom and understanding as an attitude of intellectual humility in his Commentary on Proverbs:

“Wisdom is before the face of one who understands (Proverb. 17:24).” We have already explained the issue of an understanding person, that he loves to understand words of wisdom and he has the heart to understand them. If one of these factors is missing, he is not called understanding... For if there are no people great in wisdom in his locale, he will inquire of every person that which he knows, and learn from every human being. What prompts this in him is his love of wisdom. Therefore he submits himself to learn from every human being, whether great or small, and he accepts the truth from whoever says it.

The point is that the ideal attunement to wisdom is reckoned not just, or even primarily, in terms of knowledge possessed, but in terms of an attitude of receptivity that welcomes and pursues mutual sharing among all seekers of truth.

Question 1:

Must religious systems based on divine revelation be regarded by their adherents as self-sufficient? Is there a place in principle and in practice for creative and serious engagement with other religions?

Why Share Wisdom?

Mutual sharing of wisdom with other cultures is inherently challenging for a tradition based on divine revelation, a body of revelatory life wisdom regarded as complete and perfect. Jewish authorities from the Talmudic period to the present cite biblical verses and rabbinic comments to the effect that the content and methodology of Torah tradition is entirely self-sufficient.⁸ Theoretically, whatever sharing of wisdom this position openly acknowledges would be unilateral, in terms of what Judaism can offer the world. For such authorities, even this sharing tends to be limited to just those elements of law and ethics relevant to non-Jewish behavior, or tends to be deferred entirely to the eschatological Messianic Age.

And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the tops of the mountains and shall be exalted above the hills, and all nations shall flow to it. And many people shall go and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, and He will teach us of His ways and we will walk in His paths, for out of Zion shall go forth Torah, and the word of God from Jerusalem. (Isaiah. 2:3)

Note: The eschatological ideal is here expressed in terms wisdom and knowledge: the universal desire of all nations to learn from Israel about God and His ways.

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings 12:4, 5.

The sages did not long for the days of the Messiah in order to rule over the whole world, nor to subdue the idolators, nor to be exalted by the nations, nor to eat and drink and rejoice, but rather that they should be free to engage in Torah and its wisdom, that there should be no one to oppress or hinder them, in order that they should attain the life of the World to Come, as we have explained in the laws of Repentance.

In that time there will be no famine and no war, no jealousy and no conflict. Good will be bestowed abundantly, and all kinds of delicacies available as dust. The pursuit of the whole world will be nothing other than to know God alone. Therefore Israelites will be great sages, knowing the hidden things and attaining knowledge of their Creator according to human capacity, as it says "The earth shall be full with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Is. 11:9)."

Note: The ideal way of life of the Messianic era is expressed in terms of the universal sharing of wisdom among all human beings. There is a delicacy and restraint in the way Maimonides describes the position of Torah in this enlightened world culture: Israelites and Torah wisdom will have high standing, but there is no imposition of Torah or Jewish tradition as an exclusive system upon those who are not Jewish.

The classic rabbinic source text often interpreted as affirming the self-sufficiency of Torah tradition is Mishnah Avot 5:22: "Ben Bag Bag says 'turn it over, turn it over, for all is in it; in it you will attain vision; grow old and exhaust yourself in it; from it do not depart, for you have no better value than it.'" The notion is that the Torah contains all wisdom, and that this can be discovered through sustained and diligent investigation and exclusive focus on Torah study as a life-long commitment.⁹ This very text, however, raises a methodological question regarding the approach to wisdom. The comprehensive self-sufficiency of Torah is not explicit, it requires turning over, investigation, interpretation. From where does one acquire the skills and sensibilities to ask the penetrating questions of Torah so as to discover in it all wisdom? R. Moses Almosnino (c.1515 - c.1580) addresses the repetition "turn it over, turn it over":

The first refers to engaging in Torah itself, the second, that one should engage, through it, in everything else. That is, when one studies other disciplines, he will relate them to it, so that he will strive to harmonize what he learns with what is written in the Torah... For it is impossible that you should say that Torah and other sciences are separate, for everything is in it.¹⁰

His point is that the process of turning over and interpreting the Torah proceeds together with a wide-ranging engagement with all knowledge.¹¹ R. Almosnino, of distinguished Sefardic lineage, reflects a line of thought central in medieval Judeo-Spanish and Provençal culture that welcomed a harmonizing synthesis between Jewish and non-Jewish wisdom in philosophy and the sciences.

Some thinkers took the synthesis beyond mere harmonization. For instance, R. Yedaiah Bedersi (1270-1340), writing to support the study of philosophy when it was challenged by other Provençal and Spanish rabbinic leaders during the Maimonidean Controversy of the turn of the fourteenth century, observed:

In the early generations, the corporeal conception of God spread through virtually the entire Jewish exile... However, in all generations there arose Geonim and sages in Spain, Babylonia and the cities of Andalusia, who, because of their expertise in the Arabic language, encountered the great propaedeutic knowledge that comes with smelling the scent of the various forms of wisdom, whether to a greater or lesser degree, which have been translated into that language. Consequently, they began to clarify many opinions in their study of Torah, especially with regard to the unity of God and the rejection of corporeality, with particular use of philosophical proofs taken from the speculative literature.¹²

Question 2:

Is sharing of wisdom necessary for the spiritual development of a religious culture? Do religious communities that resist mutual sharing suffer from stagnation, self-delusion and decline?

R. Yedaiah Bedersi goes so far as to say that not only is there precedent in Jewish tradition for openness to wisdom from other cultures, but that Hellenistic philosophic and scientific wisdom translated into Arabic had helped Jews of the tenth to twelfth centuries to clarify their own core religious principles. Sharing wisdom with other cultures may stimulate us to ask penetrating questions of our own tradition, to help us come to a deeper understanding of elements, even central elements, we may have previously overlooked or taken for granted. The challenge of wisdom from other religious cultures may rouse a religious community from intellectual stagnation, self-delusion and decline.

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance, 10: 6.

It is well known and clear that the love of the Holy One, blessed be He, is not bound in a person's heart until he meditates on it constantly as is appropriate and abandons everything in the world except for this, as it says "[You shall love the Lord your God] with all you heart and all your soul (Deut 6:5)." A person cannot love God except according to the knowledge by which he knows Him. According to the knowledge will be the love: if a little, then a little; if a lot, then a lot. Therefore a person must dedicate himself to understand and gain insight concerning those wisdoms and understandings which inform him of his Creator, according to a person's capacity to understand and to grasp, as we have explained in the laws of the Foundations of the Torah.

Note: Maimonides expands upon a prior discussion in "Foundations of the Torah," 2:1, on the need for scientific and philosophic knowledge to fulfill the commandment to love God. In his time, the "wisdoms and understandings" of which he speaks came from the world-wide matrix of Hellenistic wisdom developed by and shared among the Western religious traditions. Thus Maimonides is saying that shared wisdom is necessary to adequately fulfill one of the most spiritually profound commandments of the Torah: to love God.

This methodological approach was formulated more explicitly and normatively by R. Elijah b. Solomon, the Gaon of Vilna (1720-1797), one of the most accomplished and revered Torah scholars of the early modern period. He is quoted by R. Barukh Schick of Shklov (d. 1808) in the latter's introduction to his book on geometry: "When I visited Vilna in Tevet 5538 (1778)... I heard from the holy lips of the Gaon of Vilna that to the extent one is deficient in other wisdoms he will be deficient a hundredfold in Torah study, for Torah and wisdom are bound up together..."¹³ The Vilna Gaon emphasized that, in order to appreciate the wisdom of Torah, a broad and deep study of other wisdoms is necessary:

other wisdoms contribute to developing a proper knowledge base for Torah study itself.

A relatively recent approach to a theory of global wisdom that would account for how a tradition based on divine revelation would be open to, or even require, a mutual sharing of wisdom with other cultures, was articulated by R. Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel during the Mandate period. According to R. Kook:

R. Abraham Isaac Kook, Orot, (Jerusalem, 1969) 152.

God has been charitable with His world by not placing all aptitudes in one place, not in one person and not in one nation, not in one land, not in one generation nor in one world. Rather, aptitudes are scattered, and the need for wholeness, which is the most idealistic attracting power, motivates the pursuit of the most exalted unity, which must necessarily come to the world, "and in that day the Lord will be one and His Name one (Zech 14:9)."

The eternal treasury of the virtue of Israel is hidden. But to unite the world with them in a general sense it is necessary that certain aspects of certain aptitudes be lacking in Israel, such that they be made whole by the world and all the noble ones of the nations. In this way there is a place for a receptivity in Israel to receive from the world. As a consequence the way is open for influence, though receptivity is external and influence is internal. This is to say that the innerness of life is whole in Israel, without need for assistance from any alien power in the world, and all power of dominion in Israel flows from the innerness of life, "from the midst of your brethren – from the most distinguished of your brethren (Baba Kama 88a on Deut. 17:15)." It is regarding the externality of life that it occurs that fulfillment is necessary specifically from the outside, "the beauty of Yafet in the tents of Shem (Megillah 9b on Gen. 9:27)," "the valor of the nations you shall consume, and by their glory you shall be exalted... (Is. 61:6)." From the flow of the innerness of life the Congregation of Israel only

influences, never receives, "the Lord set him apart, and with him is no strange deity (Deut. 32:12)."

Note: R. Kook lays out a theory and theology of the sharing of wisdom: that by divine plan each nation is granted certain aptitudes and certain deficiencies, so that by necessity nations must interrelate to develop a collective wholeness and unity. Through this concept of divinely ordained deficiency, R. Kook addresses the inclination of nations and their associated religious systems, especially those founded on revelation, to regard themselves as perfect and self-sufficient. This necessary interdependence also applies to Israel and its place among the nations. R. Kook distinguishes, however, between receptivity and influence. The point is that at its core, in its ownmost essence, Israel is self sufficient as a nation; it can be receptive, but not subject to abject influence. Rabbi Kook roots his discussion in a verse that has a history of rabbinic interpretation condoning cooperative sharing of wisdom between "the tents of Shem," progenitor of the Semites and of Israel, and "the beauty of Yafet," progenitor of Greece and Hellenism.

R. Kook acknowledges that sharing of information between cultures is necessary, and the danger of destabilizing influence is therefore always possible. "When sharing is responsible, however, receptivity is limited to peripheral matters, while the core of Israel's culture and religion remains intact and impervious to abject influence".

In this passage, R. Kook lays out a theology of the sharing of wisdom: that by divine plan each nation is granted certain aptitudes and certain deficiencies, so that by necessity nations must interrelate to develop a collective wholeness of wisdom. This necessary interdependence also applies to Israel and its place among the nations.

R. Kook gives a further rationale for the mutual sharing of wisdom between Israel and the nations: not just as filling a deficit, but for the sake of

cultivating a peaceful, loving symbiotic relationship among all nations that issues in a higher synergy:

Concerning the other religions I will state to your honor my opinion, that it is not the aim of the enlightenment that emanates from Israel to absorb or destroy them, just as it is not our aim to destroy the world's different nationalities. Our aim is rather to perfect them and to elevate them, to purge them of their dross. Then they will automatically be joined to the root of Israel, which will exert on them an enlightening influence...¹⁴

R. Kook envisions the role of Israel among the nations as affirming the best of each nation's unique genius, helping to perfect, elevate and sanctify it according to the principles of Jewish ethics and spirituality. He goes on to explain that this engagement with the wisdom of other nations is ultimately for the sake of promoting love and understanding among all nations.

How is Wisdom Shared?

The experience of the Jewish people with other world religious communities has been conditioned externally by a complex set of socio-political and cultural pressures, and internally by a principled resistance to overt syncretism. Our tumultuous history includes the struggle to survive in the ever-volatile *Derekh ha-Yam*, or *Via Maris* region of the Middle East, crossroads between the powerful civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia; the struggle to maintain identity and integrity through exile, diaspora and persecution among often hostile host cultures; and the challenges that the more open societies of the contemporary West pose to a minority culture. Through all this, the Jewish approach to other cultures has never had the luxury of merely indulging benign curiosity or offering the confident, generous welcome of a settled and secure nation-state. Rather, the Jewish relation to other cultures and their religious ideologies has often been urgent, imposed, inescapable and dangerous, and this historical experience of vulnerability has impacted Jewish attitudes and approaches to the sharing of wisdom with other religious communities.

In certain historical circumstances and communities, the prevailing Jewish attitude to other religions and cultures is defensive: an attempt to define one's own character over against other, often dominant, religious cultures perceived as spiritually pernicious and morally corrupt. In other circumstances and communities, Jews express a positive attitude or even drive to understand other religions and their insights, and work to integrate what they learn within the authentic framework of Jewish tradition. Even in periods of general defensiveness, however, there is often a significant degree of receptivity, all the more probative of cultural pressure because it may be subliminal and unacknowledged. Conversely, in periods of general openness, there are instinctively wary counter-attitudes that work to maintain boundaries and preserve authenticity. The attitude to other religious cultures and wisdoms is one

of the pivotal distinctions between contemporary Jewish Orthodoxy, which tends to be cautious and protective, and the more liberal Reform and Conservative movements.

Generally speaking, Jewish communities, imbedded in other cultures through most of their history, have always been sharing information with their non-Jewish neighbors, even when relations were chilly or hostile. In the Talmud there is abundant evidence that rabbinic thinkers were fully aware of the non-Jewish societies among whom they lived, and commented, approvingly or disapprovingly, on their moral and intellectual qualities.¹⁵ There is further evidence of Jewish engagement in scientific discussions showing an awareness of non-Jewish positions on the issues. In certain cases, the rabbinic authorities demonstrate their intellectual honesty, deciding that the non-Jewish positions are more cogent than their own.¹⁶ We also have evidence of actual discussions and mutual sharing between Jewish and non-Jewish leaders on subjects dealing with scientific and even spiritual wisdom.¹⁷

More integral examples of receptivity in sharing wisdom can be found in authoritative medieval Jewish thinkers who systematically incorporated non-Jewish ideas into their works, not just on matters of natural science peripheral to Jewish religion and wisdom, but in the very heart of Jewish theology. Maimonides (1135-1204), for instance, in the *Mishneh Torah*, his monumental legal code, discusses divine knowledge and unity using the following formulation:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, recognizes His truth and knows it as it is. He does not know by a knowledge that is external to Him, the way we know. For we and our knowledge are not one. But for the Creator, blessed be He, He and his knowledge and His life are one, from every side and every angle and in every manner of oneness... It turns out that one can say that He is the Knower, He is the Known and He is the Knowing, all one. This thing the mouth has not the power to express, nor the ear to

hear, nor the heart of a person to recognize it clearly... Therefore, since He knows Himself He knows all, for all is dependent on Him in His existence.¹⁸

Maimonides' discussion of divine knowledge and unity employs contemporary Aristotelian and Muslim attribute theory conflated with the rigorous demands of Jewish philosophical monotheism. His description of the nature of divine knowledge, that God is the Knower, the Known and the Knowing, paraphrases Aristotle's speculation on the nature of divine activity in *Metaphysics*, 12:9, that God is the thinker, the object of thought and the act of thinking. That Maimonides includes this philosophically sophisticated discussion in his Jewish legal code, a text intended for every Jew, demonstrates his complete internalization of the cross-cultural philosophic wisdom of his time, and his confidence that this synthesis should be normative for the Jewish community. That Maimonides uses an Aristotelian formula to express the very heart of his most sublime understanding of God as One is eloquent testimony to his vision of the cross-cultural commonality of wisdom at the very highest levels. Once Maimonides and other authoritative thinkers render such philosophical ideas and terminology mainstream, one finds them appearing in the works of later thinkers, ironically even among those who take essentially rejectionist stands against sharing wisdom.¹⁹

Responsible Sharing of Wisdom

The Jewish scholarly tradition is acutely sensitive to cultivating the proper conditions for sharing wisdom, inside and outside the Jewish community. Wisdom is not a commodity to be poured from one container to another. It is a shaping of mind, and its sharing involves an intimate, mutual interpenetration of consciousness, calling for great delicacy and mutual respect. The teacher-student relationship is the heart of Jewish life, and careful attention is given to the level of preparation necessary for the student to receive and the level of mastery required for the teacher to teach.²⁰ These demands within the Jewish community also condition Jewish approaches to respectful sharing with those outside the Tradition.

The sharing of wisdom between cultures risks certain dangers. A premature, uninformed and uncritical sense of commonality can lead to an inauthentic syncretism and generalization, to false assumptions of sameness, obscuring important distinctions between faiths. For example, the notion of a common Judeo-Christian tradition often overlooks the distinctive and decisive influence of Roman religion on early Christianity, which conditions its theology and leads to theological and ethical principles that differ significantly and essentially from Judaism. Similarly, a lack of discernment regarding the subtleties of the Jewish understanding of one God can lead to an uncritical assumption that monotheism is understood identically across Judaism, Christianity, Islam and some forms of Hinduism. In the same vein, the Jewish understanding of the hiddenness of God and the insistence on non-representational theology is not merely an anti-aesthetic, and not even just an epistemological principle, but also stands as a fundamental ethical guarantee of the personal reality of God as transcendent, infinite Other. Reaching for relationship with God's Otherness, hidden and therefore irreducible, incomparable and real, sensitizes us to the mystery of relationship with all others, also irreducible and real in their own

ways. Missing this point has led to misguided attempts to see certain commonalities between theistic Judaism and non-theistic, non-personal Buddhist thought. Such examples of syncretism distort our sense of the other and of ourselves.

Question 3:

Is it possible to avoid syncretism and inauthentic influence when sharing wisdom?

Sharing wisdom is also an exercise in translation, and much can be lost in the process. Wisdom does not merely reside in the words used to express it. When conveyed without context and full cultural deconstruction, the results can be misleading and misunderstood.

There is also the possibility of a lack of parity in sharing between a dominant host culture and a subordinate guest culture. A dominant culture can even, over time, divert a subordinate culture from its ownmost course in subtle and surreptitious, as well as overt and intentional ways. For instance, the demand of logical consistency and the approach to ontology as a search for commonality, both fundamental attitudes of Hellenism,²¹ have influenced medieval and modern Jewish thinkers to limit the sense of God to abstract and psychological terms, losing touch with the vital sense of God conveyed by the Torah, Prophets and Wisdom literature of the Bible. According to Polysystem theory, however, even when there is a power imbalance between cultures, the subordinate culture tends to absorb only those aspects of the host culture that resonate with its own core meaning structure.²²

The question of responsible sharing between Jewish and non-Jewish faith communities was addressed by R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993), leading Talmudist and philosopher of Modern Orthodox Jewry, and my revered teacher. Responding, among other things, to increased interfaith contacts between Jews and Catholics during the years of the Second Vatican Council, R. Soloveitchik set guidelines and limits on inter-religious discussion and activity. He insisted on two points: that Judaism be valued on its own terms, not as a precursor superseded by other faiths; and that sharing of wisdom be limited:

*Question 4:
Should the sharing of wisdom between religions
be limited to non-religious matters?*

From Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik:

...the discussion should concern itself not with theological but with secular matters of mutual concern. In the private religious realm, each faith has its own "words" and forms which are uniquely intimate, reflecting its philosophical character, and are totally incomprehensible to people of other faiths. The claims of supernatural experiences on the part of each group differ, and an attempt to achieve dialogue on this level can cause more friction than amity, more confusion than clarity, and thereby prove harmful to the interrelationship. The areas of joint concern should be outer-oriented, to combat the secularism, materialism and atheistic negation of religion and religious values which threaten the moral underpinnings of our society. As far as religion is concerned, we should be guided by the words of Micah (4:5): "Let all people walk, each one in

the name of its god, and we shall walk in the name of the Lord, our God, for ever and ever." 23

Our approach to the outside world has always been of an ambivalent character. We cooperate with members of other faiths in all fields of human endeavor, but, simultaneously, we seek to preserve our distinct integrity which inevitably involves aspects of separateness. This is a paradoxical situation. Yet, paraphrasing the words of our first ancestor, Abraham, we are very much residents in general human society, while, at the same time, strangers and outsiders in our persistent endeavor to preserve our historic religious identity.

Note: R. Soloveitchik, in an article published in 1964, is responding, among other things, to increased interfaith contacts between Jews and Catholics during the Second Vatican Council. He is concerned to counter certain attitudes he detects among some Jewish and Catholic participants. In order to maintain the religious integrity of all parties in interfaith discussions, he suggests that the participants avoid theology, which cannot be authentically translated from one religious community to another, and instead focus on areas of common cause among all religions: combating secularism and materialism and their consequent immorality. He argues that the goal of interfaith relations should be to maintain the fruitful multiplicity and distinctiveness of all religions, rather than an attempt to enforce a unity that does violence to the integrity of each faith.

To maintain the religious integrity of all parties in interfaith contacts, R. Soloveitchik suggests that the participants avoid discussions of theology and spiritual experience, which cannot be authentically translated from one religious community to another, and instead focus on moral, social and political areas of common cause among all religions. While the "words," "forms," and "claims" of a religion, its interpretive tradition, are difficult to communicate, or even

“incomprehensible” outside the tradition, one might yet pose a phenomenological question regarding spiritual experience itself. Does all spiritual experience occur within an immediate or already-present interpretive context that is particular to a specific religious community and inaccessible to others? Or do the core experiences around which a religion coalesces, experiences approaching the horizons of shared human consciousness, have a raw, pre-interpretive dimension offering the possibility of some common ground for some degree of careful and delicate sharing and critical, fully-deconstructed comparison?²⁴ Can there be value in sharing wisdom at this level, not only for promoting social and political harmony, worthy goals in themselves, but even for meaningful, cooperative human spiritual exploration?

Question 5:

Is there a pre-interpretive dimension to spiritual or mystical experience, as the approach of human consciousness to the horizon of the Infinite, that may offer the possibility of common ground for sharing?

Examples of Jewish Reception of Wisdom

Western philosophy and science have had a profound impact on Jewish thought from the Hellenistic period to the present. Despite efforts to resist, the content and method of the Hellenistic approach to reality has been appropriated by many Jewish thinkers as a means of articulating the Jewish world view, while they have attempted, at the same time, to preserve a distinctive Jewish spirit. The Hellenistic standard of logical consistency and a mind-body dualism that favors mind over body have influenced Jewish thought and attitudes, even though they are alien to the more non-systematic and holistic spirit of biblical

Judaism. This has influenced Jewish piety from the Talmudic period to the present and has even affected the way in which Jews have come to envision God, as more closely associated with the realm of abstract intellect, as opposed to the unlimited, vital and spontaneous sense of the reality of God conveyed by the Bible.

Examples of Jewish Wisdom Given

Despite its embattled position through most of its history of exile and diaspora, and perhaps because of it, the Jewish People has had considerable impact on other world religions and cultures. The most significant gift of the Jewish people to the world is the Bible itself, the most widely read, published and translated book on the planet, a work that has had profound influence on all Western religions, whose narratives and historical vision and whose legal, ethical and spiritual principles, are woven deeply into Western consciousness.

The principle of the oneness of God has been echoed in Christianity, Islam and the Sikh tradition, each in their own ways. In Judaism, this is not just a theological idea, it is also an ethical principle: the transcendent, absolute unity of God, as understood in Judaism, subtends all reality, and transcendentally embraces all beings.²⁵ This is the basis for the responsibility of all human beings for each other, for all creatures and for the world as a whole, and it is the ground for the possibility of love and forgiveness and the overcoming of animosities between individuals and cultures.

Love and Forgiveness, Special Examples of Jewish Wisdom Given

A major gift of Jewish tradition to world religion and civilization is the conviction of the integral relation of law and ethics, that the inner spirit of the

law is the ethical ideal. This finds its most succinct expression a rabbinic discussion in the Jerusalem Talmud tractate Nedarim 9:4: "It is taught: Rabbi Akiva says 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18),' is the great principle of the Torah. Ben Azzai says: 'This is book of the generations of man [in the day God created man, in the likeness of God He created him (Gen. 5:1)]' is a greater principle than that." According to Rabbi Akiva, the entire legal structure of the Torah, justice with compassion, is based upon the principle of mutual love and constitutes a call to recognize that love and realize it. According to Ben Azzai, even that principle of ethical relationship is too limited: in the verse cited, love of the other is limited to relative parity with love of self, and love of the other is limited to your neighbor. Ben Azzai cites another verse as expressing an even more fundamental principle: that all humanity is created in the image of the divine. As such, the love and respect and responsibility due to every other human being are not relative to oneself but absolute, and this is the inner principle of all Torah law.²⁶

The possibility of mutual love among all human beings, and the demand to realize this ideal, finds concrete expression in the Jewish conception of forgiveness. The ground for the possibility of forgiveness is the generosity of God expressed through the world He creates and guides: that there is a resilience to life, and healing is possible. While the Jewish conception of forgiveness has had resonance in Christianity, the Jewish approach to forgiveness remains different from the Christian approach in theory and in practice. For Jews, forgiveness is not granted a priori, it must be earned by the hard work of apology, compensatory justice and reconciliation.

The Jewish approach to forgiveness requires that responsibility be taken for injury. This is different, for instance, from contemporary "truth and reconciliation commissions" that valiantly attempt to heal horrific wounds in victimized societies, taking a Christian-influenced approach that calls for

confession free of consequences and confers forgiveness and reconciliation, but misses the hard work: the middle step of justice through compensation. Without real justice, perpetrators are prematurely absolved of responsibility, vengeance is allowed to fester, and the toxicity of violence is not taken to heart. According to Jewish law, it is the responsibility of the injuring party to pursue the hard work of reconciliation, not only for physical and financial injuries which require monetary compensation, but even for verbal and emotional injuries, which require sincere apology. Even so, there are limits set on how far the injuring party needs to go to earn forgiveness, and the victim is enjoined to be tractable, and even to help facilitate the process proactively.²⁷ Even though forgiveness and reconciliation are ideals, the human condition requires that they be approached with delicacy, patience and forbearance.²⁸ The Jewish approach to apology and forgiveness asks both the injuring and injured parties, joined in underlying mutual love and unconditional mutual respect, to grow in sensitivity and responsibility through the process.

Question 6:

Is the demand for sincere apology and compensatory justice just a sublimation of revenge, or a process necessary for the healing of revenge and the repair of relationship?

Yuma 87a

Whoever angers his friend, even in words, must reconcile with him... Rav Hisda says: he must reconcile with him with three sets of three people... Rabbi Yosi bar Hanina says: whoever seeks forgiveness from his friend should not seek it from him more than three times... Rabbi Zera, when he had an issue with

someone, would pass back and forth before him and make himself available to him, so that he would come and settle the matter.

Note: According to Jewish law, it is the responsibility of the injuring party to do the hard work of reconciliation, not only for physical and financial injuries which require monetary compensation, but even for verbal and emotional injuries, which require clear awareness of the pain that has been inflicted and a completely sincere apology. Even so, there are limits set on how far the injuring party needs to go to earn forgiveness, and the victim is enjoined to be tractable, and even to help facilitate the process proactively. Even though forgiveness and reconciliation are ideals, the human condition requires that they be approached with delicacy, patience and forbearance.

CASE STUDY

A collective, large-scale example of a reconciliation process attuned to Jewish sensibilities is the gradual, multi-dimensional, painstaking and painful process of cautious reconciliation that has been ongoing between the Jewish and German peoples after the Holocaust. While reconciliation between first generation Jewish survivors and Nazi perpetrators has generally not been possible, their descendants have been engaged in a second-degree process that has occasionally featured responsible attempts to offer sincere apology and serious efforts at compensatory justice, however hopelessly inadequate, and a deeply thoughtful consideration of how apology can possibly be received for crimes of such magnitude. The gradual warming of political relations between the nations of Israel and Germany is at least a surface indicator, however limited, of the hard work of real healing that has been going on for decades between these two communities, though much work remains to be done. For Israelis and Palestinians, on the other hand, still engaged in conflict, real reconciliation has not begun. Even if eventually there is sufficient reduction of conflict to allow a process of mutual apology, compensation and forgiveness to gain traction, serious problems will persist. Cultural and religious differences between the parties regarding attitudes to revenge and forgiveness, and differing narratives and identities regarding the roles of victim and victimizer, promise to present profound challenges, the overcoming of which will call forth deep spiritual resources from both sides.²⁹

The wisdom of the Jewish approach to love and forgiveness, with its call for a universal love that entails concrete responsibility with exquisite sensitivity and respect for the individual, may yet have an important contribution to make in helping heal the wounds and address the terrible violence from which our world suffers today.

Suggestions for Further Reading

J. J. Schacter, ed. *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures*. Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1997.

D. Novak, *Talking with Christians: Musings of a Jewish Theologian*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans. 2005.

R. Loewe, ed. *Studies in Rationalism, Judaism and Universalism*. London: Humanities Press. 1966.

Notes:

- ¹ 1 Kings 5:9-14.
- ² Proverbs 21:30: “There is no wisdom, no understanding and no counsel overagainst the Lord.” The prophet Jeremiah distinguishes between wisdom and direct knowledge of God: “Thus says the Lord: let not the wise man praise himself for his wisdom, let not the strong man praise himself for his strength, let not the rich man praise himself for his riches; rather, let he who praises praise himself for this: to intuit and know Me, that I am the Lord, doing love, judgement and righteous in the earth, for these are what I desire, says the Lord (Jer. 9:22,23)
- ³ Jerusalem Talmud tractate Makkot 2:6 (p. 31): “They asked wisdom... they asked prophecy... they asked the Holy One, blessed be He...” Lamentations Rabbah, 2:13. *Sifrei* Deuteronomy, sec. 34 (on Deut. 6:7); *Sifra*, Aharei Mot 13:11 on Lev. 18:4. The term “Greek wisdom” is also used as a specific example of “wisdom of the nations,” though this term has other connotations. See. G. J. Blidstein, “Rabbinic Judaism and General Culture: Normative Discussion and Attitudes,” in *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures*, ed. J. J. Schacter (Northvale, NJ and Jerusalem, 1997) 1-56, for a survey of views of the Talmudic period.
- ⁴ Moses Maimonides, *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, vol. 3, resp. 57. R. Solomon Ibn Adret, *She’elot u-Teshuvot*, vol. 1, resp. 260, 415, 418. R. Menachem ha-Meiri, *Avot*, introduction. See D. Berger, “Judaism and General Culture in Medieval and Early Times,” in *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures*, ed. J. J. Schacter (Northvale, NJ and Jerusalem, 1997) 57-142, for a survey of Jewish views of the medieval period.
- ⁵ *Megillah* 16a: Rabbi Yohanan says: “whoever speaks a word of wisdom, even among the nations of the world, is called a sage.”
⁶*Hagigah* 13a: Rabbi Ami said, “One does not transmit words of Torah to a non-Jew, as it says “He did not do so for any nation, and of the laws they do not know (Ps. 147:20). “Torah” here refers to the content and methodology of the legal tradition.
- ⁷ Deut. 4:5, 6: “Behold I have taught you statutes and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, to do accordingly in the midst of the land that you are going to, to inherit. Observe them and do them, for it is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations, who will hear all these statutes and say: surely a wise and understanding people is this great nation.” Medieval commentators such as Rashi and R. Avraham Ibn Ezra take this passage broadly: that the wisdom of the statutes and laws of the Torah will be apparent to other nations and admired by them. This is because these laws will be perceived to be inherently rational (Ibn Ezra, Commentary on the Torah, *loc. cit.*), or because of their moral and spiritual benefits. In the Talmud tractate *Shabbat* 75a, that which is considered “wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations” is defined narrowly, as astronomical calculations. These verses indicate an expectation of communication between Jews and non-Jews on issues of law and religion, and a concern the foster a positive attitude among non-Jewish towards Jews and Jewish wisdom.
- ⁸ See, for instance, *Menahot* 99b, regarding the primacy of Torah study that renders study of Greek wisdom superfluous.
- ⁹ See the Mishnah Commentary of R. Jonah Gerondi, *ad loc.*: “Pore over the words of Torah, for all the wisdom of the world is comprised in it.” See, also, the commentaries of R. Ovadiah Bertinoro, R. Yom Tov Lipman Heller.

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- ¹⁰ Commentary on *Avot*, cited in *Midrash Shmuel*, ad loc.
- ¹¹ Compare, for precedent, Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Foundations of the Torah 2:1; Laws of Repentance, 10: 6. R. Aharon Lichtenstein discusses this Mishnaic statement at length, and analyzes multiple perspectives on the issue of mutual sharing of wisdom between Jews and non-Jews, in his article “Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict,” in *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures*, ed. J. J. Schacter, (Northvale, NJ and Jerusalem, 1997) 237-72.
- ¹² *Ketav Hitnazlut*, in *She’elot u-Teshuvot ha-Rashba* (Bnei Brak, 1958) 1:418. See, too, R. Moses Ibn Ezra (c.1055-c.1135), *Shirat Yisrael*, ed. B. Z. Halper (Leipzig, 1924) 63.
- ¹³ R. Barukh Schick of Shklov (d. 1808), *Sefer Euklidos*, Introduction. Compare the remarks of R. Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888), “Die judischen Hoffnungen in Ungarn,” *Jeschurun* 15 (1869) 20-22, cited in S. Z. Leiman, “Rabbinic Openness to General Culture in the Early Modern Period in Western and Central Europe,” in *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures*, ed. J. J. Schacter, (Northvale, NJ, 1997) 196-97.
- ¹⁴ R. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Letters*, vol. 1, letter 112, in *Abraham Isaac Kook*, trans. B. Z. Bokser (Mahwah, NJ, 1978) 338-39.
- ¹⁵ Just one example among many: *Berakhot* 8b: “Rabbi Akiva would say, ‘for three things I love the Medeans. When they slice meat, they only slice it on a table. When they kiss, they only kiss on the back of the hand. When they offer advice, they only offer advice in an open field.’ It is taught that Rabban Gamliel would say, ‘for three things I love the Persians. They are modest in their eating, modest in the bathroom, and modest regarding the other matter.’” Rabbi Akiva and Rabban Gamliel demonstrate a knowledge of Medean and Persian culture, and a positive assessment of some of their practical customs regarding hygiene and personal relations.
- ¹⁶ *Pesahim* 94b
- ¹⁷ For instance, *Sanhedrin* 91b features discussions on ensoulment of an embryo between Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi, political and intellectual leader of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel, and an Emperor Antoninus, according to some scholarly opinions the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Caracalla, a contemporary of Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi, known for his good relations with the Jewish people: See S. Krauss, *Antoninus und Rabbi* (Vienna, 1910) 98.
- ¹⁸ Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Foundations of the Torah 2:10..
- ¹⁹ To take one common example, the terms “form” and “matter” in the Aristotelian sense are found throughout the legal literature of the medieval and modern periods, and in the spiritual literature of Hassidism, even among authors who vigorously reject the study of philosophy. See, e.g. R. Issac Jacob Weiss, *Minhat Yitzhak* 4:17. R. Ovadya Yosef, *Yabia Omer*, vol. 5, O.H. 42. R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Gur, *Sefat Emet*, Parshat BeMidbar, 5637.
- ²⁰ R. David Ibn Abi Zimra, *She’elot u-Tshuvot*, vol. 3 (New York, 1967) resp. 472. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, H. Talmud Torah, 4:1.
- ²¹ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis, (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1969) 21, 46-7, 127. J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass, (Chicago, 1978) 89
- ²² I. Even-Zohar, “Laws of Literary Interference,” in *Poetics Today: Polysystem Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1 (Durham, NC, Spring 1990) 53-72. For instance, Jewish thinkers of the eleventh through thirteenth centuries pick up the subtleties of philosophic discussions of attribute theory taking place contemporaneously in Christianity and Islam and find

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- them useful for articulating a theology of monotheism, but show no interest in the subtleties of Christian discussions of trinitarianism taking place at the same time.
- ²³ J. B. Soloveitchik, "A Stranger and a Resident," *Reflections of the Rav*, ed. A. R. Besdin (Hoboken, NJ, 1993) 176-77. The essay was published in 1964. The Second Vatican Council presided from 1962-65.
- ²⁴ See G. Scholem, "Religious Authority and Mysticism," *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. R. Manheim (New York, 1970) 5-21, for a seminal discussion of this issue.
- ²⁵ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Foundations of the Torah, 1:1-6.
- ²⁶ See, e.g., the interpretation of R. Barukh Epstein, *Torah Temimah*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv, 1957) 72, note 2, on Gen. 5:1.
- ²⁷ Talmud tractate *Yuma* 87a,b. See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *De'ot* 7:7, regarding the basis of the prohibition against revenge.
See, too, Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance, 2:10:
It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and not be appeased, rather, he should be easy to satisfy and hard to get angry, and when a sinner asks him to forgive him he should forgive with a whole heart and a willing soul. Even if he afflicted him and sinned against him greatly, he should not be vengeful and bear a grudge. This is the way of the seed of Israel and their health of heart.
- ²⁸ *Yuma* 87 a,b. See. E. Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. A. Aronowicz (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994) 12-25, for an in-depth phenomenological analysis of this passage.
- ²⁹ See D. Bar-On, "Will the Parties Conciliate or Refuse? The Triangle of Jews, Germans and Palestinians," in *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*, ed. Y. Bar-Siman-Tov, (Oxford, 2004) 239-52.