Introduction

All Jews alive today are essentially Jews-by-choice. Very few Jews live in lands of oppression or where social pressure forces them to stay in their own communities. On the contrary, diaspora Jews are typically successful and prosperous; their lifestyles vary little from many of those around them, who in turn see them as part of the general culture and society. Any person who opts to be identified as a Jew, regardless of the level of commitment to Jewish life, is *choosing* to be a Jew.

The choice to be a Jew is an act of faith and courage. Philosopher Emil Fackenheim wrote that, after the Holocaust, every Jewish parent expresses more heroism than the greatest biblical patriarch, Abraham. He bound his son to the altar, putting Isaac's life at risk out of faithfulness to God and his covenantal commitment. The Nazis hunted even the grandchildren of Jews. Unlike for Isaac, for 1.5 million children, there was no substitute ram to save their lives. So in our time, Jewish parents knowingly put their children at risk, binding them for life. Every choosing Jew, including every convert, is committing to share Jewish fate. Most active Jews would testify that the substance of commitment is a rich and fulfilling life, embedded in family and community and connected to a higher purpose; but even so, they recognize that Jewish fate has often involved pain, suffering, and death.

In many ways, this book is driven by the impact of the Holocaust on me personally. For many years I was a fulfilled modern Orthodox Jew: in love with Jewish life and observance, and confident that God was in Heaven and all was right with the world. That was upended in 1961, when as a visiting Fulbright scholar

at Tel Aviv University, I began immersing myself in the evidence and accounts of the destruction of six million Jews. I was shattered. I could not comprehend how such a cruel and catastrophic fate could have been inflicted on Jewry without any visible Divine intervention to stop it. This was an all-out assault on the Jewish body and on the religion that taught the sacredness and infinite value of life. If the world was ultimately to live by a moral order, how could God not have intervened?

Since then, over the last sixty years, I have sought to understand whether religion—especially my religion—had lost all credibility. Was my former belief—that Judaism offered an ethical vision of a repaired world—an illusion that had to be rejected if Jews were to survive in a harsh real world?

My loving wife and family saved me from nihilism and despair by showing me the incredible tenacity and unspent power of embracing life. The emergent State of Israel suggested to me that the Divine was still operating in the world, and testified to the human capacity to take power for reestablishing life and reasserting its value. From studying European society, I came to believe that the Holocaust happened both because of the powerlessness of the victims and the local populations' failure to use their powers to stop the slaughter. I concluded that all forms of power have to be taken and employed to rebuild the world. All channels of development have to be redirected toward restoring life and its values.

This raised the challenge of developing an ethic of power that would keep its exercise on the side of life. In this book, I share the record of my response to that challenge.

A Book for People Working to Perfect the World

This book is written, first and foremost, to unpack and illuminate the meaning and the heroism of being Jewish, for all who consider themselves Jewish, and for those who appreciate, uphold, support, or love them.

I hope it will appeal to non-Jewish readers as well, especially to Christians, partners in the struggle to overcome millennia of hostility and delegitimation. People of all religions must work together to repair the world politically, economically, and culturally, and turn the Earth into the paradise all humans deserve. Readers committed to social justice in its various forms will find in these pages a rationale for universal human dignity and an agenda to realize this vision. I hope all who want to change the world will draw inspiration from the Jewish agenda for world repair.

Judaism teaches that our material world is worthy of commitment and repair—and also that the Divine realm, though neither visible nor measurable, is real and ever present. By living life to its depths, humans can encounter the Divine dimension of existence and experience the Divine Presence in everyday "secular" reality. I hope that all those who seek to live life to its depths will also find this book helpful in that search.

A Narrative Theology

Judaism's teaching of One God, beyond human manipulation and control, helped lead the world to monotheism. It challenges human claims of absolutism in religions and cultures, as well as in the exercise of human power. No less impactful has been Jewish messianism, the idea that this planet is intended to become a Garden of Eden in which all human beings will be treated with the dignity, equality, and respect due to them. This aspiration (in its various forms) injected a restlessness into the bloodstream of humanity—a rejection of the status quo, so full of inequality and injustice.

Judaism offers no quick fix for our planet. Humans, as God's partners, must take on the enormous effort of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. Against the belief that the world deteriorates over time, or that the human condition is cyclical or even fixed, in the past millennium the Jewish vision that you and I can change the world has become increasingly influential. Expressed in secular terms, this messianic

vision of humans taking power and improving the human condition drives the complex of values we call modernity, which has in turn become the dominant culture for more than two billion people on the globe, and growing.

Modern civilization has achieved tremendous improvements in material well-being for billions of people. This accomplishment, however, has become detached from the classic Jewish values of partnership, respect for Creation, acceptance of limits, and accountability to a Higher Power. This disjunction has generated new crises: climate change, species destruction, and the misuse of power to inflict oppression, racism, and even genocide.

The method of world repair that Judaism offers us is covenant: partnership between God and human beings. If Judaism's vision is utopian, universal, egalitarian, sweepingly transformational, its covenantal method of *tikkun* is realistic, particularist, personal, conservative, incremental—neither overreaching by glorifying the ideals and imposing them, nor demeaning those who do not live up to the vision. The covenant process is the key to keeping vision intertwined with reality and operating within healthy limits. Rather than simply reinforcing the ideals, covenantal values and methods are complementary, checking potential excesses and keeping respect for human beings paramount.

About This Book

This book explores Judaism's vision of a perfected world. It asks whether and how the process of *tikkun* can itself be repaired through the classic Judaic models of covenant. Finally, it examines modern history through this theological lens, and considers how the commitment to *tikkun olam* can lead us to the triumph of life.

Part 1 offers Judaism's vision of a world created out of love, to be filled with life. Chapters 1 and 2 describe the rhythms injected by the Creator into the world: a movement from chaos to order, from nonlife to life, and from lesser to greater quality of life. The great principle under-

lying the ethic of the Torah is that every human being—regardless of gender, race, skin color, nationality, or religion—is created in the image of God, and endowed accordingly with three fundamental dignities: infinite value, equality, and uniqueness. Each shares remarkable, God-like capacities—consciousness, capacity for love, the ability to create and harness power, free will. Judaism seeks to persuade humans to develop and use these capacities for world repair.

In chapters 3, 4, and 5, I describe the Bible's utopian vision that humans will use these capabilities to overcome poverty, hunger, oppression, war, even sickness, and thus roll back the realm of death. Upholding life, I argue, is the core of Jewish teaching, in the Bible and in Judaism's subsequent orientation to both daily and ritual behaviors.

Part 2 argues that the method of *tikkun olam* is covenant: a partnership between God and humans and between the generations. Chapter 6 looks at the covenantal method's orientation, in contrast to competing movements for perfecting the world. In most cases over the past two centuries, radical elements in these other world-repair movements led them to a tyrannical totalitarianism that generated oppression on a vastly more destructive scale than the evil status quos they had sought to overcome. The covenantal process, in contrast, starts with one fundamental commitment: no coercion. In the absence of using force to impose the good, the process of *tikkun* inevitably involves compromise and incremental steps cut to human capacity and scale.

Chapters 7 and 8 explore the roles of love and relationship in the covenantal method. Rather than let the *tikkun* be propelled by anger or resentment at the status quo, this method seeks to harness the power of love—for fellow humans, for God, for the goal. Covenantal partnership leads to a sweet spot on the spectrum of human responsibility—avoiding both the Scylla of a view in which humans are alone in an often hostile or indifferent world, and the Charybdis of a reality in which God fully controls disempowered humanity, who wish (rather than act) for improvement or focus on winning divine favor rather than on joining

with fellow humans to repair the world. In covenant, people feel the Divine Partner's love and yet they know they, too, must exert all-out effort, in a process built to be within human capacity.

Chapter 9 looks at covenantal time. As human capacity and culture have grown, in step with one another, the covenant has been recalibrated accordingly. The close of the biblical period, when heavenly revelation and the prophetic messages ended, was in fact a stage of renewed covenant in which God became more hidden but actually more present. The Divine Presence had to be discerned, uncovered, and embraced, as if the Israelites stood at Sinai again at a more mature level. Henceforth, their future Exoduses would have to be initiated by their actions, and their future Revelations discerned by their minds, through study. Now humans were called to a higher level of partnership. Human behavior now had greater impact; wise judgment and responsible policies, not simply repentance and Divine favor, would now lead to favorable historical outcomes.

This second stage of the covenant, Rabbinic Judaism, sustained the people of Israel through almost two millennia of challenging history. It gave Jews strength to endure persecution and frequent violent expulsion, and to emerge with their spirit and sense of mission unbroken. It fostered a profound, unbreakable connection to God, as well as a sense of community and a culture that treasured learning and literacy. Notwithstanding all these accomplishments, however, modernity brought us to the end of this second, Rabbinic stage of history.

I argue that the development of modern civilization is humanity's response to a further Divine initiative. In the third stage of covenant, God again self-limited, now to the point of becoming totally hidden in natural laws and material processes. Today, God makes more miracles than ever, but only through human agency—our unlocking the miraculous powers in physical and biological matter that only we can exercise by understanding and utilizing nature's laws. This stage also requires us to arrive at a fully mature relationship with God. Rather than relate to the Divine out of fear, incapacity, or childlike depen-

dency, we are to seek God out of our capacity and free will, and relate to God out of love and a sense of common cause.

Part 3 looks at this new stage's effect on Judaism and the world, and examines where we are headed. Chapter 10 explores modern culture's invitation to humans to take power and improve life through secular activity, in response to the Divine call for partnership. The dawn of modern civilization brought major advances in overcoming afflictions that had plagued humanity for millennia and in realizing the image of God in all human beings. It also made most Jews an offer they could not refuse: full citizenship, and an end to marginality and discrimination. Sadly, however, most religious authorities viewed those expanded opportunities negatively, often seeing them as human encroachments on divine prerogatives. As a result, a disproportionate number of modernity's leaders became detached from religion, or accepted that shedding God or religion was an important part of human liberation and world repair.

The naive engagement with material and cultural modernity came to an end with the world wars of the twentieth century and the catastrophic event of the Holocaust. Popular government, it turned out, could be channeled into totalitarianism, and modernity's amassed political, technological, and military power could be utilized for death and destruction—starting with the Jews'. Chapter 11 describes this process. By inventing realms totally devoted to death and the degradation of life, the Nazis turned the genocide of the Jews into a total assault of death on life—all in the name of utopia and world perfection, ideals by which modernity had inspired billions of people, myself included.

How can we understand our relationship with a God who allowed that catastrophe? Chapter 12 looks at my own and other people's evolving struggles with this question. I myself have come to understand the process of covenant anew. In the Shoah, God was neither absent nor indifferent. The event occurred in an age when God had already self-limited to become totally hidden and totally present. In the face of this contraction, meant to call humanity to the highest level of part-

nership, the Nazis used their freedom for an all-out attack on the Jews. The Jews had no power to stop the onslaught, but the Allies and the Jews' neighbors failed to use their power to stop the Holocaust. Thus I came to realize that the formulation of a covenantal obligation to take and hold power in ethical ways is a prerequisite for world repair.

These insights call for a reorientation of all religions, including Judaism, regarding the dynamic relationship between God and humanity. With God so deeply hidden, religion must also enter into secular realms in order to uncover the Divine Presence there too. Religion must help restructure society and culture to make God manifest in the achievement of full human dignity and justice for all. Worldwide pluralism is the imperative; partnerships between religions and between religious and secular redemptive movements are fundamental to overcoming the status quo and achieving world repair.

Throughout chapters 13 and 14, I outline the new iteration of Judaism being born, and the emerging new holy secularism, in which every life activity will be maximally oriented to quantity and quality of life. There, in all daily behaviors, the world will be turned toward life, and the immanent Divine Presence will be uncovered. This Third Era, Lay Judaism, is named after the leadership—broadened beyond past models to include every gender and class, every nationality and professional calling.

Arising from the deathbed of the Shoah, secular and religious Jews alike took on power and responsibility for life, especially through creating the State of Israel. Chapter 13 examines the decisions involved in its establishment, its redemptive accomplishments, and its ongoing work to support the guardrail principles that keep power harnessed to covenantal ethics.

Chapter 14 depicts some of the new value-bearing, "secular" institutions that can join inherited historic institutions in advancing Jewish life and a better world. This goal is so vast, it cannot be realized without the alliance of all people of good will in every religion and secular way of life. Here, I try to offer a new paradigm of the sacred for a new millennium. While I apply these understandings primarily to Judaism

and Jewish institutions, I hope that readers from other religions and movements will formulate their own applications for their communities.

Finally, the table "The Three Great Eras of Jewish History" at the book's close offers a schematic view of this narrative, depicting the historical events and theological shifts in relation to each other.

Our age began with the overwhelming destruction of the Holocaust and the unprecedented redemption of Israel's establishment. To meet the challenge and the opportunity of the coming millennium—to move the world forward covenantally—we need to gear up our courage and wisdom, as the Rabbis did. They understood that God's higher self-limitation was not abandonment, nor the dissipation of an illusion, but a call for humans to take more responsibility in partnership for *tikkun olam*. They infused this vision into every moment of life, filled every human action with life affirmation, and stepped up the pace of repair toward the final goal of universal redemption. We in turn must avoid the arrogance of thinking that we are the masters of the universe with no accountability to a Higher Power. Nor must we allow the bewildering pace of change to cause us to cower and cling to inherited ways. We must take the baton from the generations before us, hold precious their inheritance, and fill every moment and place on earth with dignity and justice for all. So, too, we must trust in the generations to come: what we do not complete, they will take on and do.

I close this introduction with prayers and blessings for you, the reader of this book. May you be inspired by these chapters to go beyond my understanding. May you reach beyond my imagining, touch more human beings, and reach higher levels of dignity, justice, and equality. If I will have opened a few doors, inspired you to work toward higher standards or future realizations of the noble visions of Judaism, then I am content. I am full of gratitude to you and to all those who will move humanity forward toward the day when, as the prophet Isaiah proclaims (11:9), "they will do no evil or acts of destruction anywhere on My holy mount, for the world will be full of knowledge of the Loving God—as deeply as the waters cover the sea."[1]

PART 1

A Vision of Life in a Redeemed World

Creation and the Dignity of Life

In the beginning, Judaism starts with Creation. Genesis's narrative of Creation stresses that important processes in the universe started long before humanity, or even life, appeared on the scene. We need to study and understand these natural phenomena, which not only shape and affect our existence but are keys to the meaning and purpose of our lives.

The first chapter of the first book of the Torah starts the story as far back as one can go—to the first moment of existence. This universe is not the outcome of a random physical process, devoid of value and blind to purpose. The world is a creation. Despite the astonishing variety of often conflicting phenomena, there is a fashioned order. There is an underlying unity to the universe: natural laws that govern the operation of forces in the cosmos and the behavior of the particles that make up all existence.

The interpretive key of Creation changes the understanding of the very nature of existence. Creation implies the presence of a Creator. The vastness of the universe implies the infinitude of what we came to call God. The Israelites came to see that there is one universal Presence, Force, and Person—the One God who shapes and sustains Creation. At first, because human understanding is shaped by the filters of local culture, they imagined God as visible, in their midst, speaking, meeting, thundering. They came to understand that God is omnipresent yet invisible, not detectable on the surface of material reality or measurable by physical means.

Then how does one know God? By intuition, by inner experience, by encounter, through emotions, meditation, and imag-

inative insight. Interior experiences give messages, just as a pressing of the flesh does or stumbling into a hard rock. The spiritual is as real as the physical.

As the relationship with God deepens, believers come to see that this world and the quantifiable surface phenomena are real—yet limited. This mortal life is a thin layer, floating on a sea of spirit and unplumbed depths. One can live on the surface, but this is to experience but a fraction of existence. The religious spirit delights in the variety of daily life and the wonders of Creation, but comes to embrace its many levels of reality. To come to know God is to experience these layers simultaneously—just as in an awakened soul, past and future interpenetrate the present. The spiritual is met in the physical. The presence of God is encountered when one dives deeply into life.

Similarly, the interpretive key of Creation opens our eyes to see the richly shaped, wonderfully wrought world created by God. We are guided to see the art, the subtle patterns and amazing interactions going on everywhere. The planet is to be seen not as a random piece of bric-a-brac or even as a delightfully reshaped piece of driftwood. The key of Creation teaches us to look for the intended effects, the built-in rhythms, the inlaid feasts for the eyes—and savor them. The religious soul grasps that humanity has been given this gift. This insight evokes the instinct "to work it and guard it" (Gen. 2:15). Touched by its beauty, ravished by its melody, one exclaims: "The Earth is the Lord's" (Ps. 24:1). The last thing humans want to do is to deface this scene or to run down the operability of its mechanisms. To degrade is an act of barbarism. Pollution constitutes wanton destruction of a created beauty. The fact that Creation has been carried out over billions of years makes abusing it for the sake of one particular generation all the more outrageous: a desecration of the sacred.

All this is true because there is a Creator—a universal Presence, a Force and Will who brings this and many other possible forms of universe into being, and sustains them.

Humans call this Creator God, and many other names. In the Torah's

first chapter, that Power is called Elohim, bespeaking an unlimited, impersonal Force, with infinite expression and boundless energy. The Creator supplies the underlying permanence in the components of reality. God has built characteristic rhythms into natural phenomena, such as growth and limits, and dynamic interactivity between forces or between creatures and environment. These pulses and flows enable and point to desired outcomes, such as life and growth in all its complexity and capacity.

We now know that these processes have been going on for billions and billions of years. They stretch over vast, infinite distances that we can only approximate and imagine. We humans are the first living forms who can even begin to understand the wondrous intricacy of the cosmic process.

Jewish religion teaches that, although the Creator is not perceptible to our senses, we can detect and connect to the Divine. We can intuit and explore dimensions of reality that elude physical detection and measurement. If we fail to expand our consciousness in this way, our perception of reality is cramped, even stunted. We are limited creatures, enclosed in our skins, captives of our cultural context, able to see only what our receptors and organizing concepts let in. The Creation story attempts to break us out of our "cave"—to enable us to see the world from the Divine perspective.

Obviously, the Torah does not free us of our human limitations. The Creation story itself is expressed in the language of Mesopotamian wisdom and terminology, comprehensible to its initial audience of Israelites living in the Middle East in the late Bronze Age. Still, if we can embrace Genesis's view and stand on the Torah's ladder to look over the universe, we will see three fundamental rhythms—instilled by the Creator—that shape our reality.

The Rhythms of Creation

The cosmos is moving *from chaos—tohu vavohu*, a chaotic void (Gen. 1:2) in the Torah's language[1]—*to order*, Shabbat in the Torah's language.[2]

This perception of the world goes against the grain of daily human experience, in which the order we create in our lives is constantly disintegrating. In our creaturely experience, the neat, orderly desk of the morning is overrun and disheveled by day's end, while best-laid plans often go awry. But if we can look through the religious lens for a moment, if we assume the perspective of the Eternal, we soon see the advance of local order through the chaos process in nature.

Today, we have a scientific language that illuminates this pattern. The second law of thermodynamics states that, over time, disorder in a closed body will tend to increase. Orderly systems devolve toward disorder, broken symmetry, and high levels of nonhomogeneous distribution of matter (clumping, etc.) with time. Nevertheless, order can be achieved locally at the cost of disorder somewhere else. The balance between those constants must be just so if the tendency toward chaos is going to be locally constructive rather than completely and violently destructive.

Our universe began with a Big Bang, an instant of explosive, chaotic violence in which nothing material can exist, followed within a trillionth of a trillionth of a second by an exponential expansion. The universe continues this expansion to this day. After the Big Bang, the universe was formed with almost perfect symmetry and homogeneity in the distribution of matter. In our universe, the movement toward disorder and complexity actually builds large-scale structures, such as stars, galaxies, galaxy clusters, super-clusters. The cosmos moves from an era where energy is so intense that it exists in the form of radiation, to an age where the energy cools and comes together as bits of matter. The process goes from vast clumping of matter to emergence of galaxies, to the birth of stars, to the condensation or generation of planets so structured and orderly as to be able to sustain life. We live in a universe so finely tuned, so well balanced that even the tendency toward chaos is incorporated into the creation of the universe, as when an errant meteor smashes into a planet and generates a moon circling around it. This exact balance between order and disorder enables the

emergence of life. Thanks to the remarkable expansion of consciousness made possible today by knowledge of physics and geology, we can see in the pattern unfolding over billions of years the emergence of an infrastructure of order that has finally resulted in a planet capable of sustaining life, which developed into sentient life and, eventually, into human life. This insight—the operation of this trend toward "ordered chaos"—is what the Creation story seeks to communicate.

This brings us to the second fundamental rhythm in Creation. The world is moving *from nonlife to life*. In the Genesis account, life is a late arrival. In the six days of Creation activity, there is no life in day one or day two. On day three, vegetation makes its appearance, but the Torah categorizes it as less than full life because it is less mobile and less visibly sentient. Not until day five do the living creatures in the sea swarm and develop; amphibians and birds follow. Still later, the latest arrivals, advanced land animals, appear on the scene. Today, with a scientific lens, we better understand just how late life appears. More than thirteen billion years after ignition of the universe, after eons of no life, one-celled life-forms come into being. Since then, there has been an explosion of life on this planet. Life has grown, radiated into every form and shape, migrated into every area. Despite occasional catastrophic setbacks and planetary die-outs, life has proliferated. Humans have identified living forms in ten million species—and counting.

Again, the human perspective on this rhythm is very different. We experience the cycle as going from life to nonlife. From the moment we are born, we begin to die. The life insurance industry with trillions of assets is predicated on clients seeing life from this perspective. However, from the outlook of the Divine, for whom "a thousand years is like . . . a [brief] watch in the night" (Ps. 90:4), the big picture is the movement *toward life*. The Torah suggests that this very proliferation is one of the best signals of the Divine Presence that "gives life to all" (Neh. 9:6).

Given the fact that death is so powerful that it overcomes all individual living things, how can one account for the growth in quantity of

life over the course of a billion years? The answer lies in the fact that God who delights in life and blesses it (Gen. 1:12,21–22,25,28,31) has imbued living things with the vital force of fertility and multiplication (Gen. 1:11–12,20–22,28). God is *melekh ḥafetz ba'ḥayim*—"the Ruler who lusts for life."[3] Life expands thanks to an unseen, hidden power of a magnitude greater than the force of death and decay, continually pumping energy into life and its nurturers. To put it into contemporary scientific language, the infrastructure of reality and the interaction of natural forces, at least in this planetary system, favors life and enables it to grow and develop.[4] This is the rhythm and balance of forces built into the Creation by the Creator.

Life is not only expanding quantitatively, but also *developing qualitatively*. This is the third rhythm in Creation. Life-forms have grown from simple, one- or two-celled organisms to creatures with highly complex, interactive systems. From beings controlled by elementary phototropic or chemical reactions, organisms with more and more consciousness have unfolded. There are now beings capable of exercising reason, of measuring the cosmos and mapping its building blocks. From asexual reproduction, life has moved to sexual selection; from chemical and instinct-governed behavior, life has matured to include emotional reactions and the capacity to love.

The Torah describes this process in its language. Humans, like all life, are planted in the ground of the Divine. Just as plants rooted in alkaline soil evolve to become more alkaline and more absorptive of the nutrients in the ground, life itself absorbs the distinctive Godly energy and evolves to become more and more like its ground, the Divine. Put another way: the qualitative development of life is that it is moving *from being less to more and more like God*. That is why the Bible describes the human being, the most developed form of life thus far, as being in "the image of God" (Gen. 1:27). This means that human life, however finite and limited, nevertheless possesses capacities so striking and powerful that they bring to mind the operations of the unlimited capabilities of the Creator.

God's Capabilities and the Image of God

In the rhythms of Creation we can discern five overarching capacities of God, all of them reflected in human beings made in God's image.

1. God possesses *infinite consciousness*. "God counts the number of stars; gives each one a name. . . . God's consciousness is infinite" (Ps. 147:4–5). The Lord is aware of each and every creature in the world. Humans have only a finite consciousness. Still, Homo sapiens with a frontal cortex has developed an extraordinarily high level of insight and understanding of nature. In my lifetime, human beings decoded the sequence of DNA, the code of life. They did not create this code; that is the work of an Infinite Consciousness operating through the process of evolution, inscribed within Creation by the Creator. Nonetheless, decoding the genome is an extraordinary accomplishment that can be fairly described as the work of a Godlike consciousness.

2. The Lord is omnipotent: that is, God possesses *infinite power*. As the psalm proclaims, "Great is God and overflowing in power" (Ps. 147:5). The human being is not the physically strongest animal in the universe, but thanks to the human mind and creativity, humankind has developed motors that generate a million horsepower. Rocket engines put forth millions of pounds of thrust, capable of overcoming the pull of gravity. Human power is not unlimited—one lightning strike generates more electricity than the human-made hydropower dam of Niagara Falls. Yet also in my lifetime, humans unleashed the power of the forces holding the atom together—yielding enough power to light up whole areas of the Earth (or to destroy them).

3. God possesses *infinite love* and capacity for relationship. "God is good to all [because] God's 'mother love' (*raḥamav*) extends to all God's creatures" (Ps. 145:9). The human is a creature who has developed a Godlike capacity for love—love so boundless as to sacrifice one's life for a loved one; love enough to choose marriage and commit to one spouse for a lifetime.[5] Human love, modeled in the Divine image, is strong enough to endure for endless years, through victory and defeat,

loyalty and betrayal, beauty flowering and fading, joy and depression, unexpected successes, unforeseen disasters and loss.

4. The Divine is pure *freedom*. God self-describes to Moses: "I will be what(ever) I will (to) be" (Exod. 3:14). The Bible teaches that there is no magic that can compel God; no service or gift or bribe that can "guarantee" a Divine behavior. When Moses seeks to know God or the Divine essence in a fixed way, the Lord replies: "I shall extend grace to [whomever] I choose to; I shall have compassion for whom I choose to" (Exod. 33:12–13,19). God is totally free to exercise the Divine will. By contrast, the lowly amoeba's behavior is totally controlled by chemical signals and responses. In the case of human beings, the range of freedom is extended so that (finite) free will can be exercised. Again, human liberty is not equal to Divine freedom but is a limited exercise—that is, in the image of God.

5. Finally, there is *life* itself. God is eternally alive, the source of life and its sustainer. The human quality of life and the human capacity to extend the quantity of life summon up the Divine plenitude of the power of life. Thus, the increase (doubling) of life expectancy in the past two centuries and the breakthroughs in fertility treatments are legitimately deemed Godlike achievements. While some religions oppose some of these activities on the very grounds that humans are using Godlike powers to tamper with Divinely ordained processes, paradoxically, even these objections tacitly confirm that increased human intervention is an exercise of a Godlike capacity.

Revelation and the Human Role in Creation

Judaism concludes that Creation's emergent rhythms grew out of capabilities and interactions built by God into the physical matter and processes of existence. Therefore, these subsequent phenomena are the result of God's will. It follows then that nature itself is full of materials with Divinely instilled qualities, processes, laws of behavior that humans can discover if they study and analyze the world. Thus, just as reading a sacred text can be a source of revelation of the Divine, so can

properly analyzing nature. Says the Psalmist, "The Heavens declare the glory of God; the sky proclaims God's handiwork" (Ps. 19:2).

However, for the first time there is a form of life capable of grasping these revelations and using them to make "miracles." How else can we describe sending and detecting sound waves around the globe almost instantaneously? Or turning a liquid hydrocarbon into a source of power, electricity, and propulsion? Judaism interprets that God's love for life, paired with God's consciousness, has foreseen and enabled the extraordinary development of life, quantitatively and qualitatively. This process culminates in human beings, capable of detecting and understanding the cosmic rhythms, grasping the Divinely willed direction and outcome of all existence. With this understanding, humans have the power and choice to join into and amplify these rhythms—or to go against them and even seek to defeat them. This capability is what evokes God's direct approach to humanity in the form of religion.

Religion represents God's revelation to humans of the Creator's love and pleasure at their capabilities. Now that they understand the cosmic directions, God also asks them to choose sides. God wants the forces of order and life to win out. God asks humans to live in such a way that in their actions, they join in on the side of order and against chaos, on the side of life and against nonlife and death, on the side of increasing quality of life and against dumbing it down. The commandments and values governing human behavior, imparted in the Torah of Judaism, are intended to direct human behavior to the side of order against chaos, of life against death. Similarly the mitzvot (commandments) and ethical teachings are designed to move human behaviors and learning toward sustaining or upgrading the quality of life—as against degrading it.[6]

Having studied and lived in the Jewish religion all my life, I try to apply this interpretive key to all of Judaism. But God wants to redeem the whole Earth and all of humanity, not just the Jewish people. As such, I believe that all the other religions of the world should teach humans to work for order over chaos, for increasing quality of life and never degrading it, for life as against death.

Judaism and Jewry have had a disproportionate impact on world civilization, but religion started long before the Jews appeared on the scene. I assume that God was reaching out to the earliest Homo sapiens, and earlier religions deciphered the message as best they could. In the Abrahamic traditions Judaism gets the credit for being the first introducer of the one, creator God to humanity, but all faiths have roles to play and their adherents are also asked to be partners.

As in Judaism, they must articulate their commitment to life and quality of life, and refine and redirect these elements in their own tradition that contradict life or assault human dignity. The Jews' understanding of being a Chosen People only means that they grasped the Divine outreach and experienced God's love and articulated it. This does not rule out God's reaching out in love to other peoples and religious communities to share in this calling. There is a lot of Divine love, and a lot of work left to repair the world—enough for everybody.

This is not the only possible understanding of revelation and religion. These cosmic rhythms have been going on for vast periods without human intervention. Some argue that, unaffected by human action, Divinely willed patterns will win out, so humans should stay out of it and not "interfere," or humans ought to play a role in the cosmic processes by doing what comes naturally and not let culture or religion change the vector of their behavior. A traditional religious variant of this idea that the natural process is God's will is the claim that humans should not interfere with natural cycles such as reproduction, through contraception, abortion, or genetic intervention. Rather, they should leave it to Divine will as expressed in the outcomes. An extreme version of this approach is the view expressed in modern Christian Science and by some medieval Jewish commentators that the practice of medicine is a sin against God, for "I the Lord am your healer" (Exod. 15:26).[7]

The enduring Jewish tradition rejects such simplistic understandings of nature as the will of God. God's grandeur is such that "islands are like a speck of dust" and "all of the Earth's inhabitants [together] are like a [bunch of] grasshoppers" (Isa. 40:15,22). Nevertheless, the

Infinite Power is deeply respectful of finite humans and concerned for them. Now that they have developed such Godlike capacities, the Creator wishes to recruit them to work for the goal of perfecting Creation.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik goes a step further and argues that the Godlike capacities are a gift of the Almighty (bestowed, by God, through the Divinely crafted process of natural evolution) to enable humans to join in the cosmic struggle for completion.[8] As we will see, this upgrading and completion is the real purpose of revelation and the ultimate goal of religion.

The Dignity of All Life

To have a truly open encounter with living creatures is to be struck with wonder at their intricacy, remarkable interactions, capacity for growth, surprising strengths, and developmental twists and turns. The proper response is to take them seriously: to feel respect, reverence, even awe. This feeling is compounded by the realization that they are fragile and vulnerable and have limited lifespans. Therefore, they should be handled with care—and valued and appreciated all the more.

As life develops over the eons, becoming more and more capable, it becomes increasingly inestimable. The Torah suggests that Adam, the human being, acts as God's regent in valuing creatures by looking at them and giving each one a name (Gen. 2:19–20). They are not anonymous, indistinguishable background noise. They are distinctive, each one a note adding richness and depth to the symphony of Creation. As life develops, it becomes more "weighty"; in Hebrew the word for honor and dignity is *kavod*, from the root *kaved* (weight or weighty). We express our recognition of this qualitative development of life, as it becomes capable of more remarkable and creative activity, by allowing it greater dignity and importance. We give life's needs greater weight, and most weight of all to human needs. Still, we respect and value every form of existence.

The halakhah (Jewish law) seeks to articulate this value by regulating behavior vis-à-vis nonhuman created things. The base law is the Rab-

binic interpretation of the ethical precept *bal tash'ḥit*, "do not destroy."[9] It is forbidden to waste, to use up for no purpose or value, any object—even inorganic matter. The ritual prohibition is code language for the importance, the independent dignity, of all in Creation. All forms of existence—alive, inanimate, organic, inorganic—have weight. None should be used for no purpose, let alone abandoned, degraded, polluted, or made toxic. To waste something for no purpose is to treat it as of no account, no value, not worthy of attention. The mere fact that something exists in nature, that is to say, is created by God,[10] means that it is weighty and should be treated as being of account. The aesthetic power in the world (such as vistas in nature) should not be marred unless this is unavoidable and there is a significant reason for making the change. Implicit in this understanding is that any negative effects of human behavior on nature must be minimized.

Since life in all its forms is a significant step up over matter, inorganic and organic, one must give it greater weight and dignity. Jewish tradition expresses this by applying greater restrictions on the manner of using it. The most striking expression of this step up is the law of *tza'ar ba'alei ḥayim* (not to cause pain to living beings). As long as they are not wasted, animals may be used, as in labor, and so too their products, such as milk and eggs, may be eaten. They may even be killed and used up for human benefit—as for meat or for fat, chemicals, medicines, and leather for clothes and shelter. However, it is forbidden to cause any unnecessary suffering to living things at any time, even in the process of killing them for the sake of human beings.[11] True, the Talmud does not apply this restriction to lower animals, insects, etc.—apparently because the science of the day saw these creatures as not having emotions or experiencing pain, or because they were viewed as predators or antagonists to human beings. Here again, postmodern science's enriched awareness of the profound links between all forms of life—the extent to which important parts of the human genome are inherited from and held in common with "lower" animals—paves the way for applying this law more universally and more rigorously. A reli-

gious orientation should take seriously antifur and other animal rights positions, Jain religious restrictions, and the vegan food movement.[12]

The halakhic status of *beriah*, a whole living organism, reflects another intensified expression of reverence for other forms of life. If a nonkosher piece of meat (be it animal, fish, bird, insect) falls into a pot of kosher food and it cannot be removed, then if the percentage present is very low (1 in 60 particles = 1.66 percent or less) the non-kosher fragment is "nullified," treated as if it were not present. The whole contents of the pot may be eaten in order not to waste the large amount of kosher food present. However, if the nonkosher piece is in fact a *whole* organism, even if it is only a very small insect, then it is not nullified.[13] As long as the nonkosher element retains the shape and appearance of a whole organism, alive or dead, it should evoke in us an awe that prevents us from ignoring or dismissing its existence.

The more we see life through a religious lens as sacred, the more we should respect the life quality and consciousness found in other living creatures. Proverbs states that "the *tzadik* [holy, righteous person] knows the soul of his animal" (12:10). The Hebrew verb "to know" is conveying not just intellectual cognition: it is an empathetic, emotional experience of the feelings and specialness of the other.[14] This should be expressed in care and consideration and good treatment of the animal.[15]

The religious perspective recognizes the unity and profound interconnection of all life. Life is on a continuum; the difference between species is a matter of degree rather than of essence. Therefore, humans should feel respect for all forms of life. The closer to humans on the continuum of life, the more intense our experiences of the other should be emotionally—and the more respectful.

In sum, the human being is the most developed and most intense form of life (at least on this planet). As we grow and become more human, we are called to live ever more deeply. This includes widening our embrace of all life. We should come to know emotionally, as well as understand intellectually, this miracle of living things. Life is the most precious of forms in the universe, the most wonderful existence

in a wondrous Creation. As life develops, it gains in value and dignity; humans should treat it accordingly. This respectful treatment is not to be extended just because some law tells us to act this way. Rather, our behavior should express our core, instinctive, loving, embracing reaction to life as a marvelous phenomenon. Religious laws and rituals should be seen as trying to awaken and guide such responses.