

## BENAMOZEGH'S TONE

---

### A Response to Rabbi Steinsaltz

*Alick Isaacs*

In the present context and for the present audience, the contribution to this symposium by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz may appear somewhat conservative: a welcome to non-Jews to practice their faiths (including faiths with which Jews have had unhappy relations historically) without concern that Judaism disapproves of them. It should be noted, then, that this article by Rabbi Steinsaltz—one of the most prolific talmudists of our time—is, understood in its Orthodox Jewish context, extraordinary if not absolutely exceptional. While making no concessions to modern liberalism or even ecumenism, and while characteristically identifying his position with that of the Talmud, Rabbi Steinsaltz reassesses current world religions, including the various forms of Hindu and Buddhist religion, as adequately monotheist, adequately nonidolatrous, and at least adequately ethical to qualify as compliant with the Noahide laws.

I do not myself believe that the talmudic approach that Rabbi Steinsaltz takes is the best one for our age, and certainly not the one calculated to lead to more (and better) than “recognition” of other world religions. The talmudic approach defines itself as *led by law*; it does not seek *to lead law*—Jewish law—toward what may be its ultimate purpose. Talmudic argumentation is not calculated, in other words, to lead to the providential culmination of history insisted on by Isaiah and other Jewish prophets. Hence my task here is like that of David Katz when, in 1992, he responded to a *Common Knowledge* article of Cardinal

Lustiger's on the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> Though wishing in some respects that Cardinal Lustiger had gone further, Katz also pointed out how, in the context of the archbishop's ecclesiastical role, he had gone very far indeed toward a reconciliation of Judaism and Christianity. While beginning, then, by pointing out that Rabbi Steinsaltz's article represents an approach so open-minded that it would not be followed by more than a few Orthodox rabbis currently, I also want to argue that other grounds for discussion of non-Jewish religions need to be found and developed in the Orthodox Jewish world. I want to argue, essentially, *outside the context* in which Rabbi Steinsaltz and any other talmudist will naturally and comfortably argue. Eventually Judaism must inquire after the purpose of the Noahide laws on metalegal—one might even say prophetic—grounds, rather than on the grounds of tradition and law. I must add that, in my view, the prophetic does not contradict the talmudic approach: prophecy underscores the tradition's theological, rather than legal, purpose. The Talmud tends to look inward, focusing on a community bound by its premises, while prophecy often looks extramurally (and upward). A Judaism that does not equally teach Talmud and prophecy is a Judaism impoverished of half its ancient riches.

By invoking prophecy, I mean to recall the symbolic role of Israel as it appears in the Bible. The people of Israel were the first recipients of monotheism. Their national duty was to carry the burden of knowing God. As Ilana Pardes has shown, that burden was carried with irksome difficulty and ambivalence.<sup>2</sup> The Jews were called upon to break idols and deny idols and ridicule the makers and worshippers of idols, as the psalmist says: "Their idols are silver and gold, / The work of men's hands. / They have mouths, but they speak not; / Eyes have they, but they see not. . . . / They that make them shall be like unto them" (Psalm 115). All the same, this nation of iconoclasts continued to commit idolatry itself. Biblical idolatry—it should be clear—represented a crisis. Idolatry in Israel thwarted the divine plan for an ever widening revelation. Israel was to be the vehicle of revelation, the son representing incarnate the existence of the Father in heaven. It was in this context, the context of a mission endangered, that the injunctions against gentile religions were carried into normative talmudic Judaism. In the Mishna and Gemara, stringent laws ensure that Jews will have no contact with pagan ritual objects. Jews are even now forbidden to drink wine from the cup of a gentile for fear that the wine may have been consecrated in the name of a false god.<sup>3</sup>

1. David S. Katz, "Cardinal Lustiger in the History of Philo-Semitism," *Common Knowledge* 1.2 (fall 1992): 118–25. Katz's article is a response to Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger, "From Despair to Hope," 110–17 in the same issue.

2. Ilana Pardes, *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

3. The talmudic tractate Avodah Zarah comprises five chapters dedicated to the rules of abstention from idolatrous festivities. The discussions in these pages list detailed stipulations that prohibit contact with idols and ritual objects used both directly and indirectly in the rites of idol worship, such as animals for sacrifices, wine for libation, and the containers used to preserve wine. The injunctions extend to unnecessary social contact with gentiles and to restrictions on shared business ventures.

This problem is one of historical context, and almost anything can be made of a history as vast and complex as that of Judaism and the Jews. It is only too easy to listen, week by week in synagogue, to Torah readings that involve the years, the centuries, in which *gentile* could only mean *idolater* or *heathen*, and then apply the words unconsciously, unthinkingly, automatically, to the religions and peoples of the present day. To do so is a grave mistake. The Jewish tradition is best defined by its in-built capacity to evolve. Jewish law is called *halakha*, from the Hebrew root *halakh*, meaning to walk or move. Law is recognized in Orthodox Judaism as by nature on the move and evolving through time.

As Rabbi Steinsaltz makes clear, the major gentile religions of today are not those of the biblical era. Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Taoists, Shintoists, and especially Muslims and Christians are not—do not in any significant way resemble—Baal-worshipping Canaanites or Pharaonic Egyptians or Amalekites or child-sacrificing worshippers of Molech. Leaving aside the East and South Asian religions (which, to his great credit, Rabbi Steinsaltz by no means leaves aside), all varieties of Christianity and Islam are not only monotheistic but *biblically informed*. They share the Jewish national burden of knowing the one God. In this sense, they too are agents of revelation. Precisely how this sharing of agency should be represented and practiced among the monotheisms is a matter of gravity, yet not one of active concern in the rabbinic community. The halakhic tradition, entrusted to the rabbinate, resists prophetic discourse. An uncollegial voice insisting upon renovation or far-reaching conceptual change will be met with the talmudic maxim, “it is not in heaven”—a shorthand avowal that even God has no standing to interfere with or object to rabbinic interpretation of the laws given at Sinai.<sup>4</sup> How law is to be applied or adjusted in changed circumstances is a matter handled daily by the rabbinate; and such change, as I have said, is expected. Fundamental reassessments, however, are (in the full meaning of the adjective) unthinkable. Taking full account of Christianity and Islam as biblically informed monotheisms would require just such a reassessment on the rabbinate’s part.

The relationship of the church to Israel is a theological point of great seriousness to Christianity; and though Jews have found Christian doctrine on the subject disadvantageous at best, no one can say that Christian theology has given Judaism inadequate consideration. Lately the churches have reassessed and reformulated their relationship with Judaism in a discourse more prophetic than legal or theological, and the changes mandated have been correspondingly sweeping. Jews, on the other hand, have from the beginning figured Christianity as a burdensome illegitimate child and have regarded its antics with suspicion or not at

4. Deuteronomy 30:12, “it is not in heaven,” is cited by Rabbi Joshua in the Babylonian Talmud (Baba Metzia 59b) to support the startling claim that, because God gave the Torah at Sinai, it is no longer in heaven and thus not in God’s purview.

all. One exception in recent years is the historian Israel Yuval, whose work tends to undermine the metaphor of Christianity as child (illegitimate or otherwise). Yuval suggests that the New Testament and the Jewish Oral Law developed in tandem—that they represent parallel traditions, each evolving in response to the Hebrew Bible and to the imposition of radically new conditions after the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. Such a claim would have Judaism and Christianity represented as siblings rather than as parent and child. As Yuval writes this history, the relationship is a sibling rivalry in which Judaism and Christianity have fought for the attention of their parent—the God of Israel. And the more they fight, the more similar this Jacob and Esau have come to seem.<sup>5</sup>

Yuval's figuration of the relationship has perhaps more in common with the ecclesiastical than with the rabbinic versions. The medieval iconography of Ecclesia and Synagoga—the former robust and triumphant, the latter blind and pitiful—imagines Christianity and Judaism as unequal sisters. But over the past several decades, the church has come to conclude that Christianity and post-Temple Judaism are equally covenantal religions, equally successors to ancient Israel—and that, of the two sibling religions, Judaism has inherited the privileges of the first born. Pope John Paul II has repeatedly referred to Judaism as “the elder brother” of Christianity. The Catholic Church, in a series of audacious doctrinal reassessments, has by now renounced supersessionism entirely. The rabbinate has ignored these new doctrines assiduously, but they require serious attention and respect. The church has knocked—knocked, at long last, respectfully—at Israel's door and no one has answered. Vatican II is not being met with a “Jerusalem I.” Rabbi Steinsaltz's answer to the church is: yours is a different door to salvation than ours. You will not be damned when you knock at the gate appropriate to you but should expect no blessing and no brotherhood and not much conversation at the door through which we Jews pass.

Yet Isaiah has it that the final Temple in Jerusalem will be “a house of prayer for all peoples.” Not inconceivably Isaiah meant, almost 3000 years ago, that a situation like the present one would eventually prevail. Half the world by now belongs to biblically informed traditions. Judaism as a religion has taken almost no notice, though noticing could bring momentous satisfaction. Instead of resistance or rivalry, a Jew might feel astonished pride that so tiny a nation's literature (the Hebrew Bible) has had so disproportionate an influence throughout the world. But after satisfaction would necessarily come responsibility. Israel is called a priesthood to the nations—but in what sense? Are not priesthoods intermediaries between a congregation and their God? In what sense do the Jews now serve a consciously intermediary role on behalf of humankind and especially on behalf of that 50 percent of it that by now accepts the God of Israel as their own?

5. Israel J. Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2000).

Rabbi Steinsaltz's approach, as I understand him, amounts simply to recognition of non-Jewish faiths. His claims may apply to the South and East Asian religions that he discusses but not to those with dogmatic investments in Jewish Scriptures. He mentions more than once that gentiles are forbidden to follow laws and observe customs specific to Jews. But Muslims are of course circumcised and forbidden to eat pork. Christians are in their own way Sabbath-observant, valorize the Ten Commandments, celebrate versions of Jewish festivals (Easter—Pacques, Pascua—is a reinterpreted Pesach, Passover), recite psalms during the Divine Office, read Old Testament passages in church, and say ancient Jewish prayers at communion. (The *sanctus sanctus sanctus* of the mass is the *kadosh kadosh kadosh* of the statutory Jewish services. Catholics have said the Hebrew prayer *kedushah* in Latin and most vernaculars every hour of the day for centuries.) Rabbi Steinsaltz acts as though Judaism has nothing to say about such matters. By his own logic, Judaism should condemn these observances. However, by another kind of logic, Judaism should feel awe, and respond with at least fraternal care.

Rabbi Steinsaltz concludes his piece with a brief reference to Elijah Benamozegh (1823–1900), whose book *Israel and Humanity* is a statement warmly responsive to Islam and especially Christianity. So far as it goes, Rabbi Steinsaltz's evaluation of Benamozegh is of course accurate: he was an Orthodox rabbi who addressed other religious traditions in Jewish and hierarchical terms. Even so, it must be stressed how extremely unusual his stance was toward the other monotheisms—how extremely unusual it still is within the Orthodox rabbinate. In his evaluation of Christianity and Islam, Benamozegh went well beyond the uninterested recognition that Rabbi Steinsaltz recommends. What is most exceptional and, for us today, exemplary is Benamozegh's tone. "And now," he writes climactically,

we turn to the followers of the two great messianisms, Christian and Moslem. It is to Christians in particular that we wish to address a frank and respectful word, and God knows that it is with fear in our heart lest our advances be taken for hypocrisy. No! No impartial and reasonable man can fail to recognize and appreciate, as is appropriate, the exalted worth of these two great religions, more especially of Christianity. There is no Jew worthy of the name who does not rejoice in the great transformation wrought by them in a world formerly defiled. We cannot listen to the noblest and most precious names in Judaism, the echoes of its holy books, the recollection of its great events, its hymns and prophecies, in the mouths of so many millions of former pagans of all races, joined together to worship the God of Israel in churches and mosques, without feeling imbued with a legitimate pride of gratitude and love toward the God who effected such great miracles.<sup>6</sup>

6. Elijah Benamozegh, *Israel and Humanity*, ed. and trans. Maxwell Luria (1914; New York: Paulist, 1995), 50.

Having noted the miracle of Jewish influence on Christianity, Benamozegh then returns the compliment:

As for ourself . . . the reading of certain passages of the Gospels has never left us unresponsive. The simplicity, grandeur, infinite tenderness, which these pages breathe out overwhelms us to the depths of our soul; and we should easily have been won over by the seductiveness of this book if not for a special grace, and if we had not been long familiar with this thrill through the writings of our sages, by the Aggadah above all, of which the Gospel is indeed a chapter.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, Benamozegh viewed the relatedness of the monotheisms in more than the historical terms appropriate to a scholar, and in more than the legal or talmudic terms expected of an Orthodox rabbi. His viewpoint was mystical and, ultimately, prophetic. He saw Christianity, in particular, as having disclosed elements of Jewish belief that, until the Gospels were written, had been covert (though universal) among the Pharisaic rabbis. “Jesus asserts,” Benamozegh writes,

that he has come into this world to declare aloud—according to Luke 12:3, to preach “upon the housetops”—what before him had been taught secretly. As he believed himself to be the Messiah, and his disciples believed the messianic era to have begun, they thought that they were henceforth excused from all caution; and so the esoteric philosophy of the Pharisees was exposed in broad daylight and revealed to a throng which could scarcely comprehend its least word. (169)

Thus, to Christianity, Benamozegh argues, “belongs the honor of making the principal attempt to create a universal religion—but upon Christianity must also devolve the responsibility for failure” (52). The apostles and theologians of the New Testament failed, he says, through “lack of learning,” to understand and properly teach “genuine Hebraic” conceptions of the Godhead, the Noahide laws, providential history, and the messianic kingdom (55). The role of modern Jewish theologians like himself is, Benamozegh holds, to advise Christians about how to bring the end of history for which they have so long prayed:

I hope that Christians will not forget that what speaks in these pages is the Judaism from which Christianity was born; that the interests of the one and of the other are interdependent; and that, finally, it is

7. Benamozegh, *Israel and Humanity*, 51. Benamozegh apparently implies here that the New Testament is aggadic—in other words, talmudic in status but homiletical rather than legal in its content and style.

Christianity, reformed to be sure on its first model [Hebraism], which will always be the religion of the Gentile peoples. And this will come about through Judaism itself. The reconciliation dreamt of by the first Christians as a condition of the Parousia, or final advent of Jesus—the return of the Jews to the heart of the church, without which the various Christian denominations agree that the work of redemption must remain incomplete—this return, we say, will occur, not as it has been expected, but in the only serious, logical, and durable way, and above all in the only way which would be advantageous to the human race. This will be the reconciliation of Hebraism and the religions which were born of it. According to the last of the Prophets, as the sages called Malachi: “He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents” (Mal. 3:24). (59)

Much, then, of *Israel and Humanity* is devoted to advising Christians, with affection and regard, about what Judaism, and especially the Jewish prophets and mystics, have always taught. But the book also addresses Jews, educating them to take Christianity—as the one universal religion, modeled on the national religion of Israel—with requisite seriousness and respect. For Jews who condescend to Trinitarian doctrine as an impure variant on monotheism, Benamozegh points out that Judaism is not nearly so absolute in its monotheism as such Jews want to claim. Not only hasidic varieties but all varieties of rabbinic Judaism are pervaded by mystical doctrines and practices and liturgical features that depend on belief in divine *midot* (aspects) or *sefirot* (emanations); many of the rabbis whose teachings appear in the Talmud were themselves mystics of this kind. Benamozegh shows, in his brave, unworried tone, that the principal difference between Jewish and Christian monotheisms is that the Jews believe in many more *sefirot* (Christians believe in just three). He goes on to explain that both kabbalah and Christianity are ways of distinguishing between, on the one hand, immanent divinity—that aspect or emanation that responds as it were emotionally to human action and supplies the mechanism of revelation—and, on the other hand, *Eyn Sof*: the unreachable, untouchable, strictly incomprehensible divine essence. For Benamozegh, the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is a correctable misapplication, not an idolatrous apostasy. “The Christian Incarnation,” he writes,

is but an imitation of the Hebrew *Shekhinah*, or divine immanence, of the *Malkhut* of the Kabbalah—though with an essential difference. According to Christianity, the descent of God into the finite is accomplished in the bosom of mankind alone, or rather in a single man; but for the Kabbalah, the incarnation exists in and through the very fact of the entire creation, although man occupies the central focus.<sup>8</sup>

8. Benamozegh, *Israel and Humanity*, 202. *Malkhut* (kingship or sovereignty) is the lowest of the divine *sefirot* and identified in kabbalistic literature with the Shekhinah.

Christianity, to put this another way, “has transformed” the idea of the Shekhinah, “the divine immanence,” into “the conception of a man-god” (194). Benamozegh’s tone is corrective here but also deferential, like the tone of a great teacher addressing a great pupil (a pupil who perhaps socially outranks him).

In other words, there is more than enough material—so Benamozegh amply demonstrates—with which to work toward reconciliation of the three “Abrahamic” monotheisms (as the present pope called them, repeatedly, on his pilgrimage to Israel). There is ample material, if there is also the good nature and goodwill that Benamozegh demonstrates, along with an urge like his to fulfill the prophecies (some of them intensely mystical) of Isaiah, Zechariah, Ezekiel, and company. I agree with Jeffrey Kripal’s argument, presented in part one of this symposium, that reconciliation will be achieved, if at all, at the level of shared mystical beliefs in a God who defies—laughs to scorn—all representation, doctrine, and claims to ownership.<sup>9</sup> I agree also with Tobie Nathan’s conclusion, in part one, that the only diplomats qualified to approach the peace table are “those strange human beings who, without abandoning their own kind, without renouncing their divine owners, love their neighbors’ gods as well.”<sup>10</sup> To love one’s neighbor’s God, at our present historic juncture, is just another way of loving one’s own. They are all by now, in every relevant sense (I quote Zechariah 14:9), One.

9. Jeffrey J. Kripal, “Comparative Mystics: Scholars as Gnostic Diplomats,” *Common Knowledge* 10.3 (fall 2004): 485–517.

10. Tobie Nathan, “The Phasmid and the Twig,” trans. Devorah R. Karp, *Common Knowledge* 10.3 (fall 2004): 530.