Introduction

Biblically, we Jews identify God with Truth and Truth with Justice. But we also identify Justice in its highest form (*tzedakah*) with generosity or grace (*hesed*) and grace in turn with the beauty that finds its source and highest peak in God.

My purpose in this book is to argue for God's truth as the highest reality. I will argue that God is the unique and ultimate One, the Highest, in whom the infinity of things find their unity, mirroring the unity of His infinite Presence. Those thoughts reflect God's causal ultimacy and fecundity, His goodness and generosity as the Beauty beyond perceptible beauty, the ingenuity of design, of which He is the ultimate Source, and the generosity that models the love we humans owe each other and the regard we owe all creatures.

I'll lace together here the biblical usages that warrant my claims made in the first sentence of this introduction before I summarize the argument of this book's four chapters.

We find the Hebrew word for truth applied to God in its core sense of faithful trustworthiness (see Psalms 115:1, 117:2, 138:2) when Abraham's servant sees in Rebecca the marks of character that he seeks in the wife he has been charged to find for Isaac. Having met her at the city well in Haran, and having received water from her for himself and for his camels and rewarded and honored her with gold jewelry, he asks her about her parentage and about a place to stay the night and keep his camels. Her answer: "*We have ample straw and fodder, and room for you to lodge." The man bowed down and prostrated himself before the* LORD*, saying, "Blessed be the* LORD*, my master's God, who has not forsaken His truth and favor toward my master. The* LORD *has led me to my master's brethren."* (Genesis 24:24–27).

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Truth here is paired with grace, as it will be again in the epiphany Moses will experience at Sinai soon after the troubling episode of the golden calf. He hopes to learn from God's ways the character he must cultivate in himself if he is to govern his people. Mercy, grace, and patience are prominent among the attributes of God's governance that Moses hears, along with love and truth. And the mention of truth leads on to thoughts of justice. For God's grace, we learn, as if listening along with Moses, does not hold the guilty guiltless (Exodus 34:6–7). The Psalmist reflects this revelation to Moses of God's goodness and truth, saying, *all the pathways of the* LORD *are truth and grace* (25:10; cf. 86:15). The aspiration inspired by those words is of us too to walk in God's ways of truth (26:3–4; cf. 57:4–11), a truth that the Psalmist calls protective, finding it so regularly paired with love (61:8).

Etymology shows the links of truth with justice. For the Arabic root *s-d-q* means truth. A *sadiq* is a friend, reliable and true; but with a slight shift in vocalization, the same root identifies a saint. A *tzaddik*, in Hebrew, is a saint; and the same root bears the sense of being in the right, vindicated legally. The Arabic word *sadaqa*, like the Hebrew *tzedakah*, means charity. We readily see why. For justice in full measure calls on one to give all persons their due, and indeed all that one would ask for oneself, were the positions of giver and recipient reversed.

Noah, we read, was a *tzaddik*, a just man, by sharp contrast with the others of his generation (Genesis 6:9). And we are commanded to use just weights and measures (Leviticus 19:36, Deuteronomy 25:15), a natural transferred epithet, calling a weight or measure just, as if to reflect the rightness of an act and reflect back on the actor. Underlying this nest of cognate terms is the idea of deserts: A fair measure is what is deserved, whether of grain or flour, fabric or funds in a fair exchange. That, we learn, matters to God: *a false balance is loathesome to the* LORD*; a just weight is His delight!* (Proverbs 11:1).

The Torah is not shy about universalizing such norms and stating them as imperatives: *Justice, justice shalt thou pursue!* (Deuteronomy 16:20), it commands. The emphatic repetition, says Ibn Ezra, the doyen of medieval biblical grammarians, means to stress that one must pursue justice all one's life and vigorously pursue it, win or lose or draw. As Bahya ben Asher added, the same divine imperative commands justice toward everyone. And one of the Hasidic masters pressed the point: The same commandment forbids any use of unjust means even to attain worthy ends.

The Torah commands the institution of a system of justice (Deuteronomy 16:18). And the Rabbis identify that imperative as the

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one positive commandment among the seven given by God to humanity at large, every descendant of Noah, as they put it. Joseph Hertz (1872–1946), Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, wrote in his commentary on the Pentateuch, "Justice is not the only ethical quality in God or man, nor is it the highest quality; but it is the basis for all the others." Rabbi Hertz goes on to quote F. Adler: "Justice is the awe-inspired respect for the personality of others, and their inalienable rights."[1]

Since justice is of such moment in God's eyes, it is not surprising that as the Mosaic Torah rises to its climax in the Song of Moses, God is called *the Rock whose work is perfect. For all His ways are fair, a faithful God, who does no wrong, just and upright He* (Deuteronomy 32:4; cf. Nehemiah 9:33, Job 4:17). For, as Elihu argues in the Book of Job, only the just rule rightfully; and God, who rules all things, is eminently just (*tzadik kabir*, Job 34:17).

God's truth is His justice, but it is also His grace and favor. So the Psalmist, hoping to escape the threat of death, argues that the dead cannot praise God and testify to His truth (30:10; cf. 31:6). Their testimony will be God's thanks. His truth here is His saving help (cf. 43:3, 69:14, 71:22), as the Midrash explains (Psalms Rabbah 30.6), comparing the reversal celebrated as the psalm ends (30:10–13) to the denouement of the crisis recorded in the Book of Esther (4:3, 9:19).

As for beauty, Isaiah uses the term *hadar* when he pictures the land itself rejoicing at God's coming to set things right on earth, flowers in bloom, the desert turned as lovely as Carmel and Sharon (35:2). The tasteful dress of the good wife in Proverbs 31 is, again, a thing *of dignity and beauty*, as the paean to her puts it (*'oz ve-hadar levushah*, 31:25). Absalom was beautiful, so was Alcibiades in his time. Yet their beauty was tarnished even as it shone. But God, the Psalmist says, is clothed in beauty (104:1). I recall Tom Paine's thought here, grasping that image and glossing it midrashically: The beauty in which God is said to be clothed is but the earthly show and shadow of a higher beauty, veiled in physicality to accommodate to our human awareness. The beauty we see in God's works, the beauty of the sunset, the stars, or the aurora, is only the curtain enrobing the transcendent beauty of the Maker who transcends them (Psalms 111:2–4).

The paradigm of beauty, for the Psalmist, is God Himself: All the gods of the nations are noughts – *The* LORD *made the heavens! Majesty and*

[1] Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, on Deuteronomy 16:18–20. For the passage from Friedrich C. Adler (1771–1828), see 821.

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beauty attend Him, glory and splendor in His sanctum (96:5–6). God's sanctum, as the poet pictures it, might be sought high in the heavens, whose sublimity befits His beauty. Yet God's manifestations fall far short of His true beauty, which is His holiness (1 Chronicles 16:29). Lesser beauties aspire to such loveliness, and rightly so – as do the moral and intellectual/spiritual beauty that we humans reach for in our thoughts and practices, pointing toward that Higher Beauty that is their Source and Goal.

In Chapter 1, "Logic and God," I turn to the startling first epiphany of God to Moses at the burning bush. Reduced from the royal palace in which he was raised to the exile of a fugitive, Moses remains a man of spirit, of curiosity, and of principle, loyal to his people, although living as a shepherd in the household of his father-in-law. It is there, in exile, that God reveals His name to Moses and gives him his mission: to confront Pharaoh, free his people Israel, and bring them back that very mountain to receive a new law and the way of life that law prescribes, a gift and a charge from the God of their ancestors.

Drawing on Maimonides' reading of God's message to Moses, I argue that the name God gives Moses to relate to his people back in Egypt, as proof of His absoluteness, cannot have been a mere name. For, as Maimonides argues, had it been familiar to them already, it would prove nothing. And had it been unfamiliar it would have been even less effectual. Rather, that strange name *I am that I am*, encapsulated in the Tetragrammaton, if it were to prove anything at all, must have embodied an argument that the elders among the Israelites could be expected to grasp and find convincing. It was, as Maimonides argues, a compact statement in essence anticipating what we would call the ontological argument, the argument that what is absolute cannot fail to exist.

The chapter has some words to say about the familiar dismissal of such arguments by Hume and Kant, running back to Gaunilon's response to the ontological argument set out by Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century. We can see anticipations of Anselm's intuition in the writings of Philo of Alexandria and in kindred thoughts in Avicenna and al-Ghazali. The argument, as I read it, is not wholly a priori, not based on logic alone, nor, on mere analysis, of the idea of divinity. For it presupposes, inter alia, a hierarchy of being. Otherwise, Anselm would have been unable to speak of greater or lesser beings and call God a being "than which none more perfect can be conceived." Spinoza will play a significant role here since he takes seriously the idea of God's absoluteness. But the chapter will also consider a version of the ontological argument framed by Kurt Gödel.

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And it ends with a discussion of the linkage seen by Maimonides and Spinoza (and before them by Plato, Aristotle, and the Neoplatonic philosophers) between knowing God and loving God – and being known and loved by God.

Chapter 2, "God and Mathematics," seeks to examine the relationship of two ideas about God that seem, on the face of it, to exclude each other: God's oneness and His infiniteness. From a Jewish standpoint, the tensions between God's unity and God's infinity may seem especially insurmountable. For the Torah's affirmation of God's unity (Deuteronomy 6:4) has been a watchword of Judaism immemorially. Initially, God's oneness, as proclaimed to Israel, might have meant little more than the affirmation that all Israelites, despite tribal differences, bear allegiance to the same one God. But the God of Israel, as heard in the Mosaic Torah, does affirm that there is no other (4:35). And He insists that no rival deity shall be recognized (Exodus 20:3). He firmly forbids the making of any image that might try to bring divinity down to earth and under human control (20:4–6). And His law condemns all forms of necromancy and theurgy (Leviticus 19:31, 20:6, 27; Deuteronomy 18:11). He is the sole deity, creator, ruler, and judge of all the universe. We humans do not control God. That is part of what we mean in declaring God unique.

There will be no pagan pantheon in Judaism and no Trinity or Duality of deities. Jewish martyrs died with the proclamation of God's unity on their lips. And, as if in tribute to their sacrifices, Jewish philosophers carry the idea of God's unity to a peak of simplicity. Maimonides, for one, argues that even conceptually God is indivisible, or He could not be a being of absolute necessity (*Guide* I 51, 58a). The very idea of attributes proper to God, he argues, is a mere projection of human traits and therefore a worse affront conceptually to God and His unity than even pagan worship (*Guide* I 36, 54–56). How, then, does the affirmation of God's absolute simplicity square with thoughts of God's infiniteness – which, like unity and uniqueness, anchor the biblical idea of divinity?

Georg Cantor, the modern mathematician who did the most to make sense of the idea of infinity, was a pious Lutheran and did associate God with his thoughts about infinity. But, as a mathematical Platonist, Cantor is less able than he might have been to help us relate God's unity to intuitions of divine infinity. Philo proves to be of greater help here. For he anticipates Plotinus in overcoming Aristotle's discomfort with thoughts of infinity. Aristotle does affirm the infinite divisibility of a continuum like that of time or space, and he does hold the cosmos to be infinitely old. But he stoutly denies that *any* magnitude, even the universe

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itself, can be infinite, leaning on an unworthy sophism that denies that any *magnitude* can be infinite, since any size must be bounded and therefore finite. Critically for our purposes, Aristotle finds the idea of infinity inconsistent with his profound conception of God as pure and perfect actuality.

But Philo, like his rabbinical contemporaries, was inspired by biblical images of God's boundlessness. Encouraged by Stoic thoughts of the energy and dynamism of the divine, he did not find God's unity and perfection incompatible with thoughts of His boundless creativity, wisdom, and inspiration. Later monotheists, with Philo's help, were well prepared for Plotinus' bold appropriation of the ideas of infinity and power that Peripatetics had long held in the Aristotelian keep of potentiality and want of definition.

Here again Spinoza is the conceptual virtuoso who, by his courageous rigor, can reveal the harmony of unity and infinity in God. Denying that the world, or even a body, or time or geometric space is composed of separate parts, Spinoza discerns the unity of nature, not just spatially but in his own far more inclusive and dynamic sense. The holism here is indeed organic. It underwrites a monism that had long stood tantalizingly at a remove for radical monotheists, frustrated by the difficulty of fulfilling their hope to see all things in God (and God in all things) without, as a result, swallowing up God in nature, or swallowing up nature in God.

Spinoza's bold expedient of recognizing thought and extension not as substances, as they had been for Descartes, but as attributes of the one *and infinite God*, who expresses Himself in infinite attributes (each one of which is a facet of divinity but none of which collapses his infinity or exhausts His oneness) allows him to pay tribute to God's unity without compromising the boundless diversity in which God's unity and infinite power expresses itself. This chapter owes a special debt to the philosopher Errol Harris, who articulated Spinoza's strategy with brilliant clarity. And it examines some of the monistic pretensions of the Kabbalah, exposed by Louis Jacobs.

Chapter 3, "God and Science," explores, the impact of the idea of divine design, partly by reviewing the Stoic version of the design argument captured like a moth in the ancient amber of Cicero's dialogue *On the Nature of the Gods*, and partly by way of a current approach advanced by Stephen Barr, a Catholic physicist. Following up on ideas that he credits to Brandon Carter, Barr has assembled an array of pretty basic facts known to physics today about the nature of the universe we inhabit. He marshals eleven of these in his book *Modern Physics and Ancient*

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Faith, none of them matters of logical necessity or inherent in the most basic demands of physics, but any one of which is a critically necessary to the rise of life or the kind of physics and chemistry that would make life possible, or even a universe any more hospitable than the welter and waste the Torah invites us to imagine (since we can't picture sheer nothingness) in suggesting what things might have been like absent God's act of creation.

Barr labels the facts he calendars "anthropic coincidences." The term 'anthropic,' as speculative cosmologists have been using it in recent decades, is meant to suggest a world made for us – or even *by* us, as ventured by those who have drunk deep of idealist fantasy, a world that answers to our understanding because it is in fact the product of our own thought processes. Barr is far more modest than that. But he does observe, speaking as a cosmologist, that unless certain parameters had been just so, we and our world could never have come to be.

Barr's use of the word 'coincidences' plays with light irony on the thought that whoever hopes to hold onto the idea that the world just happened, as if by chance, would have some pretty tall explaining to do. Scriptural monotheists do not abandon causality when they confront totality. And they do not believe that any finite or determinate being just has to exist, as if its existence were self-explanatory. The idea of creation rests on the recognition that all things known to our experience are contingent. Barr's point is that even with the barest givens at the outset (for the red shift argues that there was an outset), there were some pretty tricky bobbins to thread before anything could arise at all like a habitable world. That makes Barr's "coincidences" well worth contemplating.

Moving on from Barr's elenchus, our chapter warns of some of the pitfalls of anthropocentrism that mar Stoic ideas of design. But it takes seriously the idea that nature is a coherent system. Those thoughts lead us to Maimonides' recognition that the unity of nature makes a powerful case for the unity of God. Religion and science stand together here. For today's exponents of a multiverse, like their Epicurean predecessors with their infinite worlds, are all too ready to abandon the coherence of the natural sciences. Yet the idea of consilience, central to the commitment to the practices of scientific authority on which all cosmology depends, both rests on and sustains recognition of causal coherence. An atheological bias skews the intentions and contentions of the exponents of a multiverse here: Recognition of universal natural laws, they fear, might give color to the thought that nature is built to a plan.

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Chapter 4, "God and Value," looks to moral, aesthetic, and political values as God's hallmarks in nature at large and in human life specifically. Moral realism is a key corollary of theism. Some derive the very notion of a moral law from the commands of God. Yet the more extreme versions of divine command theory, we find, breed a variety of theistic subjectivism that saps the very authority of the idea of divinity that it may have been intended to uphold.

Kant is right, I would argue, that piety sees moral duties as divine imperatives. But since we often have a clearer sense of right and wrong than of divine moral sovereignty, it makes more sense, I think, to see God's absoluteness through our (still fallible) recognition of moral truths. Maimonides strikes the right balance here, I believe, by arguing that biblically God and His justice are inseparable (*Guide* III 17, 35a). Clearly, then, the argument can run either way: One might proceed from God to morals (insofar as one has reliable knowledge of God's expectations) or from morals to God (insofar as one's moral compass is in good order and not skewed by appetite and convention, cranked up to overweening heights of passion by the play of imagination). But, given the vulnerability of human moral and theological apprehensions, it may be best prudently to rely on moral and theological traditions to serve as checks on any temptation to slide toward excess in one direction or the other. For misguided amoral or theological hubris all too readily skews human judgment in these domains and predictably results in a moral and theological train wreck.

Turning, more happily, to thoughts of beauty, I think we do see the colors of God's palette where we seek them, in nature, just as reflective scientists can see God's handwriting there as well. So, I think it worthwhile to recognize that the arts use their vehicles of painting, music, sculpture, and the rest when they aim creatively to convey the insights of their makers as to the play of God's grace and wisdom in nature, including human nature. I chose a few examples of artists to exemplify the point in the inevitably brief compass of the chapter, focusing on the two friends Anton Chekhov and the Jewish landscape painter Isaac Levitan to help make the point and drawing a few lines from John Dewey, where his experience of art marked an exception to his committed and too often doctrinaire pragmatism. What drew me to Levitan and Chekhov here was partly their affinity for one another, which allowed Chekhov to put into words the spirit and spirituality that Levitan far more readily expressed in paint. Other artists get briefer mention in what can barely touch on so vast a topic as artistic truth. Not all art, of course,

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need be celebratory. Some of the greatest artworks of paint or pen are critical; some, despairing. These too have truths to share. But I do bracket kitsch and propaganda for their crude reliance on emotive cliches and invidious or simply vicious stereotypes. I also set aside works like those of Lucien Freud and Francis Bacon, who have seemed keener to evoke shock and disgust than to communicate the grounds of their discontent with life itself and the human condition.

Turning to ethics and politics, I think Gandhi stands out as a moral virtuoso in modern times, much as Tolstoy or Dostoevsky did as literary virtuosi. So, I have a few words to say in this final chapter about Gandhi's project of *satyagraha*, the quest for truth and the imperative it lays down for us. In my book *In Defense of Truth*, I spoke at some length about Gandhi's campaigns in this public and more personal domain, which found a paradigm case in his leadership of the courageous and portentous salt march to the sea. So, it did not seem appropriate to expatiate on the same emblematic topic here. But I do urge interested readers to have a look, and I do think everyone should be interested in the moral, communal, and political lessons to be learned from the example probed there. I did, however, want to close this book with reflections on what I take to be the nexus between truth and morals.

Moral truth, this final chapter argues, bears that name and exerts the imperative it lays before us because moral obligations reflect the claims of beings. Deserts spring from the conatus found in every being, the dynamic claim of all beings to existence, and their striving to persist and perfect their being and express their reality in the best ways accessible to them. Even a rock, a mountain, or a waterfall has its own mode of being and expression. Solidity and the inertial tendency of bodies to remain in motion once they are moving are exemplary of conatus elementally. So is the gravitational attraction of one body for another.

But conatus takes more dynamic forms with the approach toward what Lucretius called the shores of life: Viruses reach for life; bacteria strive to persist, multiplying and experimenting collectively with varied unselfconscious genetic strategies in the rapid turnover of their generations. Teamwork is a key theme among such strategies, evident even among mosses and corals and in many other lifeforms. But as life advances in evolutionary terms and by evolutionary means, individuality grows more prominent – bringing with it the threat of death, reflecting the growing prominence of individuality among living beings.

The rise of sexual reproduction, found in all the higher plants and animals, allows the lineages of living beings to harness the play of chance

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itself, experimenting genetically but mixing and matching the results so as to retain successful genes but mask or mute the impact of less helpful alleles – and, most notably, by combining the contributions of male and female parents in the discrete, but not inviolable, chromosomes. The effect is to shuffle the genetic deck without shredding the cards. At every evolutionary phase in the rise, proliferation, and evolutionary advance of life, a good is present, locally defined in terms of the claims of the creatures and their lineages. But that local good is itself emergent, as purposes become increasingly autonomous and individuated, reaching a stage ultimately, in the case of persons, who are free in some measure to choose and guide their own purposes and projects.

Just as we have a moral obligation to face facts, we are called morally, as conscious beings, to treat all beings as what they are. The moral charge, accordingly, is twofold: (1) to respect the claims of beings, animate and even inanimate, insofar as they are compatible with one another and with the more stately and ambitious claims of higher beings and (2) to pay deference to the claims to life and self-perfection of persons and of those individuals that stand at the penumbra of personhood because they are becoming persons or have been persons.

The deserts of persons, as moral subjects, mark the boundaries of what we properly call rights and dignities. But all living beings deserve our regard for what they are, that is, for the claims they make, equilibrated according to the relative weight of those claims and the claims of other beings. The effort to define the parameters of such concerns is, I believe, among the chief functions of cultures in modulating the norms of a social order. Some individuals and some cultures address such concerns by vegetarianism or veganism. In Judaism, the laws of kashrut pursue such a goal, aiming to meet human nutritional needs without undue oppression of birds and beasts. We have similar rules aiming to spare the soil, giving it its own sabbaths of years, in keeping with its rhythms (Leviticus 25:2–7), just as self-use is regulated by a more human rhythm of days (Exodus 20:8–11). And we seek to sustain human bodily dignity by banning tattoos, scarification, and mutilation (Leviticus 19:28). Even the corpse of an executed criminal must be buried by nightfall (Deuteronomy 21:23).

Inanimate nature as well as animal and plant life are respected through the blanket prohibition of wanton waste and destruction, the ordinance of *bal tashhit*. The general imperative forbidding wanton destruction is broadened rabbinically from the biblical prohibition of cutting down fruit trees in a siege (Deuteronomy 20:19). As Abraham Chill explained

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The wanton destruction of trees in war is a sign of unbridled barbarism. The Rabbis extended the concept of *bal tashhit* to include any act of unprincipled waste or destruction of things that can be of benefit to man. Reckless demolition is an effrontery against God, since everything is His creation.[2]

Rabbi Chill goes on to quote the classic *Sefer ha-Hinukh* by an anonymous fourteenth-century Levite sage of Barcelona:

To the righteous person, no man is so unimportant that one may ignore his loss and not try to save him. In the same light no living thing, not even a mustard seed, is so insignificant that it may be destroyed without reasonable cause.[3]

The affirmative side of our respect for human deserts, is represented by the demands of charity and by making healing a communal obligation, grounded ultimately in the obligation to preserve a human life. But respect for human life goes hand in hand in Judaism within the treatment of human understanding as an end in itself, reflecting the premise that each individual is an autonomous end.

[2] Chill, *The* Mitzvot, 444.
[3] Chill, *The* Mitzvot, 444; see also Goodman, "Respect for Nature."

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