

## Religious Praxis: The Meaning of Halakhah

(1953)

My approach to the subject of the Mitzvoth, and to Jewish religious praxis as a component of living religious reality, is not that of history or theology.<sup>1</sup> I will not elaborate a philosophic justification or rationale of the Mitzvoth, but intend rather to focus upon their meaning for Jewish religion as we live it and are capable of living it here and now. My theme is not historical; it is contemporary. To be sure, we are all influenced by the literary sources from which we learn what Judaism has been and what outstanding Jews have thought, but we shall not be bound by such sources. Citations and allusions to them will serve as illustrations, not as evidence. My contentions will be exemplified by selected citations, though I am fully aware that the sources include expressions of views and opinions which differ considerably from one another and are at times even opposed to those set forth here.

I will not talk about the substance of Halakhah, but rather about its religious meaning for the observant Jew. Nor will I expound specific laws, norms, reasons for various prescriptions and proscriptions, or the grounds for halakhic decisions. The Halakhah cannot be unambiguously defined in terms of its content. Although, as a system enduring over time, it is a totality, its details present considerable variation over the generations. Controversy and diversity of opinion abound within its framework, yet the opposed views are all regarded as "the words of the living God."<sup>2</sup> What characterizes Judaism as a religion of Mitzvoth is not the set of laws and commandments that was given out at the start, but rather the recognition of a system of precepts as binding,



even if their specifics were often determined only with time. Moreover, this system of norms is constitutive of Judaism. The very being of Judaism consists in its imposing a distinctive regime on the everyday existence of the Jew, a way of life shaped by the Oral Law, which embodies human understanding, the understanding of men who aim at establishing the rule of Torah over their lives.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, the Halakhah is far from rigid. It is the intention of realizing the Torah in life that distinguishes the shaping of Halakhah by the preceptors of the Oral Law from its modification at the hands of the Reformers. In rendering their decisions, the former are guided by considerations which appear to them grounded either in the Halakhah itself or in the conditions necessary for halakhic observance. The latter act out of motives which reflect not a sincere attempt to understand the Halakhah itself but rather a desire to adapt the Halakhah to a variety of human needs, cultural, moral, social, and even political.

We characterize Judaism as an institutional religion, but not merely in the sense that it comprises institutions. That is characteristic of all religions. The description is intended to reflect the peculiarity of Judaism, for which the institutions of halakhic practice are constitutive. Apart from them Judaism does not exist.

Contrary to widespread and superficial belief, Halakhah does not exemplify religious fossilization. Credos and religious standards of value, as abstract principles, tend to petrify. The institutional religion whose principles and values are not confined to consciousness but are expressed in concrete manifestations in the lives of those who adhere to it is the truly living religion. The Halakhah represents Judaism in its full vitality.

Students of the history of religions and cultures differ as to the relation of myth and ritual in primitive religions. In the age of rationalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was axiomatic that primitive peoples fashioned rituals to express their world view and sense of life, which were embodied initially in their myths. Today many observers maintain the opposite view. Ritual is the primary phenomenon and myth is the attempt to interpret the ritual and attach meaning to it. In the case of Judaism, where religious belief and action are intertwined, is the religious praxis a superstructure erected on a foundation of religious values comprising both cognitive and emotional components, or is the spiritual and mental world of the Jewish religion a superstructure

rising above a basis of religious practice? The answer to this question must be sought neither in dogmatic considerations nor in normative ones, but through empirical examination of historical facts. Within Judaism, the content of faith—the categories of religious cognition and sensibility—are interpretations of the system of Torah and its Mitzvoth. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that this approach does not detract from the primary element of faith inherent in the religious stance of the Jew. Whether one says, “I observe the Torah because I have had the privilege of recognizing the Giver of the Torah,” or declares, “I have been privileged to recognize the Giver of the Torah as a result of having accepted the yoke of the Torah and its Mitzvoth”—in either case, one’s point of departure is that of faith, which can only be grounded in the stance of Abraham: “and he had faith in God” (Gen. 15:6). The uniqueness of Judaism, the characteristic which distinguishes it from other faiths and religions, namely, its embodiment in the Torah and the Mitzvoth, cannot be understood at all if the Torah and its precepts are not construed as data preceding recognition of the Giver of the Torah “to whom there is no analogy whatsoever.”<sup>4</sup> Judaism was embodied not in an abstract set of beliefs attained by many who had never heard of Abraham or of the Mosaic Torah, but in the Torah and the Mitzvoth.

Medieval Jewish philosophers, for whom rationalism was not a methodological postulate but a world view, defined the Jewish religious collectivity as one dominated by a common idea: *Qeḥal Hama’aminim* or *Qeḥal Hameyahadim*.<sup>5</sup> From a historic-empirical point of view this was completely erroneous. Articles of faith were the subject of violent dispute. The very idea of divine unity was interpreted in ways which were almost antithetic. Nevertheless, the unity of the community remained unimpaired. What Judaism created was a community that maintained the Torah and observed its Mitzvoth, a community that retained its identity despite extreme differences in theological opinion. Many great sages who succeeded Maimonides and are celebrated as saintly figures would have been regarded by him as idolaters, and he would, no doubt, have excommunicated them and regarded them as deserving extermination. Yet later generations through which Judaism was passed down considered the various opposed views to be words of the living God. It was thus not beliefs or opinions that determined the identity of Judaism. Its continuity was



that of its religious praxis. This is why the Hassidic movement, which neither intended to create a new Halakhah nor did so in fact, remained an integrated and live member of the Jewish body, despite the psychic distance and abyss of enmity which separated Hassidim from their opponents, who went so far as to attempt to excommunicate them. Compare this with the fate of the Sabbatean movement, which, owing to its defection from observance of Mitzvoth, was ejected from the body of Jewry, its ideology remaining beyond the pale.

This empirically confirmed fact of Judaism as a distinct historical phenomenon, which preserved a constant identity, maintained its continuity over a period of three thousand years, and was embodied solely in the Mitzvoth systematically structured in the form of the Halakhah, will serve as a point of departure. Only by virtue of the Halakhah was Judaism delimited as a single independent and autonomous unit distinguishable from others. Within Judaism, faith is a superstructure rising above the Mitzvoth; the Mitzvoth do not subserve faith. Acceptance of the principles of Jewish theological beliefs by individuals or entire communities did not lead to their incorporation within Jewry. Such principles were discovered or conceived independently by individuals and groups who had no contact with Judaism. Furthermore, within Judaism precisely the articles of faith were subject to controversy. In any event, articles of faith were variously interpreted in different generations and even contemporaneously. The upshot was that Judaism as a historic entity was not constituted by its set of beliefs. It was not embodied in any specific political or social order. Contrary to the views of Samuel David Luzzatto, Ahad Ha'am, Hermann Cohen, and their followers, Judaism did not consist of a specific ethic.<sup>6</sup> Morality can be neither Jewish nor non-Jewish, neither religious nor irreligious. Morality is morality. The attempt to fuse morality and religion is not a happy one. Morality as guidance of man's will in accordance with his knowledge of nature and of himself (the Stoics; Spinoza), or in accordance with what the individual considers his duty toward man as an end-in-himself (Kant), differs radically from religious consciousness or religious feeling. From the standpoint of Judaism man as such has no intrinsic value. He is an "image of God," and only as such does he possess special significance. That is why Judaism did not produce an ethical theory of its own, was never embodied in a moral system,

and made no pretenses of representing a specific moral point of view. The Bible does not recognize the good and the right as such, only "the good and the right in the eyes of God" (Deut. 12:28). The systematic ethical theories found in later Jewish sources (Maimonides; Bahya ibn Pakuda) were either adopted from non-Jewish sources or were guides to the systematic cultivation of the religious virtues, appeals to stricter adherence to the Torah and its commandments (Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto).<sup>7</sup> Judaism as a specifically defined entity existing continuously over a period of three thousand years was not realized in philosophy, literature, art, or anything other than halakhic living. Hence whoever is able to achieve religiosity only through the channels of Judaism, or whoever is interested in the Jewish manifestations of religiosity, must, willy-nilly, come to grips with the religious praxis of Judaism, with the world of Halakhah.

It may well be that a typological factor enters into the personal understanding of the relationship between the institutional aspects of religion (in the case of Judaism, the Halakhah), and the realm of values associated with faith and religious cognition. In other words, a good deal may depend upon the psychic propensities of each individual, and one cannot generalize and contend that in any given religion the institutional aspects or the abstract values have priority. Among the religious some believers may consider that faith precedes religion and others will say that religion antecedes faith. One person may proceed from a given realm of values—of principles of faith and abstract obligations—to participation in their realization in concrete manifestations. Another may reach the world of religious values as a result of taking up the yoke of Torah and Mitzvoth, the burden of institutional religion, the ideational content of which is formulated in terms of belief. However, one who is not naturally inclined toward religiosity will never attain religious faith and commitment to religious values except through the medium of institutional religion; if he is a Jew, through the religious praxis of the Halakhah.

A prevalent conception, which stems from a shallow rationalism, distinguishes kernel from husk in religion; the eternal ideational content of absolute value becomes incarnate in various external forms, which may, without loss, be exchanged for others and ought to be superseded from time to time to fit changing circumstances. This distinction is baseless. Substance is embodied in form. The essence of a



given content is inseparable from the particular form which it takes on. Were it clothed differently, it could not be the identical content. An analogy with poetry is pertinent. Here, too, the distinction is sometimes made between substance and form. Shakespeare expressed his *eros* in the very specific form of his collection of sonnets—one of most moving masterpieces of world poetry. A naïve person may contend that it is possible to separate the essence of the Shakespearean *eros* from the artificial and intricate form in which he chose to express it. Such is not the case. Had Shakespeare chosen the form of the novel or the essay, the *eros* conveyed would not have been the same. His *eros* could be expressed authentically in no other medium than that of the marvelous form chosen by him. Similarly, the content of Jewish faith—the stance of man before God as Judaism conceived it—can be externalized in one form only, the halakhic system. The belief that the substance of Jewish faith can be retained when the Halakhah is adapted to human needs, whether these be material, spiritual, or mental, is mistaken. The essence of Jewish faith is consistent with no embodiment other than the system of halakhic praxis.

Apart from Halakhah, all flowering of creativity within Judaism was but episodic and fleeting. Consider one of the great religious manifestations in the history of Israel, the Kabbalah. A great inquirer into the history of Jewish faith, Gershon Scholem, revealed the significance and role of mysticism within Judaism. Thanks to his work we are aware, as never before, of the important role of this phenomenon. Scholem believed he had proved that Judaism had a fundamental aspect in addition to the halakhic one. It would appear, however, that he inadvertently proved the very opposite. The grand structure of the Kabbalah was created and developed after Judaism had already been delimited as a historic entity characterized by features which determined its continuous identity. Judaism existed long before the Kabbalah commenced and was not impaired after the wilting of the magnificent flowering of the Kabbalah and its almost total disappearance as a living pursuit. Moreover, even in its heyday, the Kabbalah was never identical with the whole of Judaism. Alongside it, and in opposition to it, grew various schools which rejected this mystic tradition. Thus the Kabbalah, probably the greatest extra-halakhic growth within the framework of Judaism, was only an episode and not a constitutive element in its identity. This identity and the persisting existence of Judaism were cer-

tainly never dependent upon some specific philosophy, ethic, world view, or theology. "Prophetic vision" and "messianic vocation" were never principal factors in Judaism or foci of its daily life. Even the medieval rationalists who tended to identify Israel as the *Qahal Hameyahadim* contributed nothing to an understanding of the phenomenon of Judaism.<sup>8</sup> Monotheistic beliefs were adopted by many outside the Jewish community independently of Jewish influence. For Judaism itself, the verse of Shema does not denote a proposition but serves as a slogan whose chief function is the rejection of idolatry in all its forms. As for the positive meaning of Shema, nothing was so hotly contested in the world of Jewish religious thought as the meaning of this verse ("Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one"). Not only do the "One" of Maimonides and the "One" of Isaac Luria fail to coincide, they are incompatible.<sup>9</sup> How to understand that in the consciousness of religious Jewry both appear legitimate? The answer is that their differences did not affect the Halakhah. Recognition of the obligatory nature of the Torah and its *Mitzvoth* and of man's stance before God as determined by them was common to both interpretations. This framework, upon which both interpreters agreed, prevented a rupture. Hassidism did not become a schismatic sect either, despite the gulf separating it from the world of rabbinic learning. On the other hand, and precisely because it divorced itself from the halakhic praxis, Christianity tore away from Judaism and became a separate religion, in many respects alien and antagonistic to Judaism in spite of its recognition of the sanctity of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In yet another respect it is erroneous to describe the Jews as "the community of monotheists" (in the medieval style) and Judaism as a complex of "values," a formula favored by contemporary secular Jewish ideologies. Judaism is a collective reality. One cannot be a Jew *qua* isolated individual. A person is a Jew insofar as he belongs to the people of the Torah. But consciousness, sensibility, and valuation are radically private, not collective. "They shall be yours alone, and not shared by strangers."<sup>10</sup> In this domain there is no possibility of communication. A person's understanding and feeling derive from his own subjectivity, which differs from anyone else's. It is impossible for one person to communicate to another exactly what he feels: except for the formally defined terms of scientific discourse, the meanings of words and expressions of our common language vary from person to person



in communication and in private thought. Hence there can be no collectivity of ideas or feelings. Collectivity is limited to the field of action—to cooperation in performance and achievement. Of course people will often jointly say or declare something. But it is only as acts that these declarations may be considered collectively performed. Hence if Judaism is a collective reality, not as the set of beliefs and the religious experience of individual Jews but as the religion of the Congregation of Israel, it can only consist in the common religious action—the halakhic praxis.

To base Jewish religiosity upon membership in the community of Israel and adherence to its institutional religion differs from the position of Maimonides yet does not contradict it. Maimonides maintained that religious perfection, which is man's ultimate perfection, consists of "cognitions," "neither in deeds nor in virtues." Cognitions are forms of personal awareness and are "his alone and not shared by strangers." All action and all the social aspects of human existence are reduced to the status of preparatory conditions which qualify man for the attainment of his true perfection.<sup>11</sup> Maimonidean anthropology, with its emphasis upon man's individuality, is at least partially a product of the historic situation of Jewry in exile, a community divested of independent social functions and deprived of civic roles and obligations. Vicious regimes in Spain and Morocco prevented Maimonides from engaging in any meaningful activity other than that of nurturing his inner quest for perfection and aiding other Jewish individuals in theirs. A gracious monarch in Egypt similarly liberated him and his fellow Jews from all concern with the political functions and from responsibility for the social needs. This enabled each one of them to concentrate on the attainment of personal perfection without fear of persecution. Had Maimonides, as the citizen of a free and independent Jewish society, been burdened with the tasks and obligations involved in the arrangement of political, economic, technical, and organizational public affairs—upon which rests the individual's ability to engage in personal matters—it is likely that his anthropology would have been less individualistic. Maimonides was torn between two conflicting tendencies. As against the personalistic and individualistic conceptions of religious perfection and of the meaning of religious observance, we also find in his writings a social interpretation of the significance of the Mitzvoth.<sup>12</sup> For our contemporary religious existence we can only accept his second interpretation.<sup>13</sup>

Today we are far more sensitive than was Maimonides to membership in the community as an essential aspect of a man's personality. Religious Jews must include the problems of state, society, and nation, of politics and history, within the sphere of religious concerns. I am a participant in the life of Torah and faith to the extent that I am a member of the community of Israel. As an individual I have neither the drive nor the capacity to create a religion and faith of my own. Since cognition and will are essentially personal, private, subjective, and individual, the religious community was not produced by beliefs or values. There are no communities of will, no general will, no collectivities of ideas. On the other hand, a common way of life is characteristic of most human groups. The endurance and continuity of the Jewish religious collectivity result from the objective factor of halakhic practice rather than from some form of subjective consciousness that is likely to change as its individual bearers succeed one another. Halakhah is founded on faith, yet at the same time constitutes this faith. In other words, Judaism as a living religion creates the faith upon which it is founded. This is a logical paradox but not a religious paradox. The Halakhah is not an external wrap clothing Jewish religion or faith. It is the sole form in which they can be embodied, the collective manifestation of Judaism.

Current attempts to identify Judaism with the Hebrew Bible, which is presented as proclaiming values, ideals, and a vision that "shine with their own light," are unrelated to the Halakhah and are independent of it. This kind of bibliolatry is Lutheran, not Jewish. Historically, Israel never lived or intended to live by Scripture, nor was it ever intended so to live religiously. Israel conducted its life in accordance with the Halakhah as propounded in the Oral Law. From the viewpoint of human values the above identification overrates the importance of the Bible. As instruments of moral education, Sophocles' *Antigone* or Kant's *Grundlegung* are possibly superior. As philosophy, the Bible's importance cannot compare to that of Plato or, again, Kant. Regarded as poetry, Sophocles or Shakespeare may surpass it. As history, Thucydides is certainly more interesting and profound. Only as the words of the living God is the Bible incommensurable with Sophocles and Shakespeare, Plato and Kant, Thucydides, or any other work of man. But what way have I of knowing that these twenty-four books are Holy Scripture other than through the Halakhah which canonized them? The decision about which books to accept as Scripture was not



made behind the veil of mythology or pre-history, but took place in the full light of history and in the course of halakhic negotiation. We are told that the Sages considered relegating certain books to the Apocrypha. Only as a result of examination and discussion did they decide to include them among the holy writings. The book of Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus), for example, at one time accepted as part of the canon, was eventually rejected.<sup>14</sup> Were it not for the Halakhah as the authoritative presentation of the religion of Israel, the individual could never know what were the values and faith of this religion as found in Holy Scripture. The religion of Israel, the world of Halakhah and the Oral Law, was not produced from Scripture. Scripture is one of the institutions of the religion of Israel. Both religiously and from a logical and causal standpoint the Oral Law, the Halakhah, is prior to the Written Teaching, which includes faith and values. In cybernetic terms one can define the relation between the Bible and Halakhah as one of feedback: the Halakhah of the Oral Teaching, which is a human product, derives its authority from the words of the living God in Scripture; at the same time it is the Halakhah which determines the content and meaning of Scripture.

Thus far we have only discussed the historico-empirical role of the Mitzvoth in Jewish history. What is the religious import of Judaism's embodiment in Halakhah? How to understand the peculiar nature of the religious faith for which Halakhah is the only adequate expression?

The first mark of the religion of Halakhah is its realism. It perceives man as he is in reality and confronts him with this reality—with the actual conditions of his existence rather than the "vision" of another existence. Religion is concerned with the status, the function, and the duties of man, as constrained by these circumstances. It precludes the possibility of man's shirking his duties by entertaining illusions of attaining a higher level of being. The religion of Halakhah is concerned with man and addresses him in his drab day-by-day existence. The Mitzvoth are a norm for the prosaic life that constitutes the true and enduring condition of man. Halakhic religion has no flair for the episodic excursions from the routine of everyday life, for evanescent moments of solemnity. Halakhic praxis is oriented to the usual and persisting, not to the exceptional, momentary, and fortuitous. The Mitzvoth require observance out of a sense of duty and discipline, not ecstatic enthusiasm or fervor, which may embellish one's life but do

not tell how to conduct it. Resting religion on Halakhah assigns it to the prosaic aspects of life, and therein lies its great strength. Only a religion addressed to life's prose, a religion of the dull routine of daily activity, is worthy of the name. This is not to demean the poetic moments, the rare occasions when a man breaks away from the routine, the experience of rising above the self spiritually and emotionally, the deeds performed fervently. It is quite possible that such moments mark the zenith of a human life. Nonetheless, the fundamental and enduring elements of human existence are in life's prose, not in its poetry. Molière's M. Jourdain discovered at the age of forty that he had unwittingly been speaking prose all his life. No one ever claimed to have been talking unwittingly in poetry. Only in full awareness and intention does one compose poetry, and such awareness and intention occur only at rare moments. A religion of values and concentrated intention is the religion of life's poetry, which can only adorn it. The religion of halakhic practice is the religion of life itself.

The Judaism of the Halakhah despises rhetoric, avoids pathos, abjures the visionary. Above all, it rejects the illusory. It does not permit a man to believe that the conditions of his existence are other than they really are. It prevents flight from one's functions and tasks in this inferior world to an imaginary world which is all good, beautiful, and sublime. Not by chance are so many of the Mitzvoth concerned with the body, procreation and birth, food and drink, sexual life, diseases, and the corpse. The largest section of the Mishnah, the first crystallized formulation of the Halakhah, is *Seder Taharoth*, which places man within the squalor of biological existence from which he can never extricate himself.

Most characteristic of the Halakhah is its lack of pathos. The Halakhah does not depend upon the incidence of religious experience and attaches little importance to the psychic urges to perform extraordinary deeds. It strives to base the religious act, even in its highest manifestations, on the permanent habit of performing one's duty. "Greater is he who performs because he has been commanded than one who performs without having been commanded."<sup>15</sup> Precisely this nonpathetic attitude hides a depth of intense pathos. How unfounded is the imaginary antithesis of the inner religious experience and the formalism of the halakhic praxis, an antithesis so popular amongst the opponents of the religion of Halakhah!

Two types of religiosity may be discerned: one founded in values



and beliefs from which follow requirements of action, the other posited on imperatives of action, the observance of which entails values and intention. The religion of values and beliefs is an endowing religion—a means of satisfying man's spiritual needs and of assuaging his mental conflicts. Its end is man, and God offers his services to man. A person committed to such a religion is a redeemed man. A religion of Mitzvoth is a demanding religion. It imposes obligations and tasks and makes of man an instrument for the realization of an end which transcends man. The satisfactions it offers are those deriving from the performance of one's duty. The religious practitioner serves his God *lishmah*—because He is worthy of worship.<sup>16</sup> The two types of religiosity may be found within all religions, but religions differ from one another in the extent to which one type predominates. A religiosity of the first type is characteristic of Christianity. Its symbol, the cross, represents the sacrifice God brought about for the benefit of mankind. In contrast, the highest symbol of the Jewish faith is the stance of Abraham on Mount Moriah, where all human values were annulled and overridden by fear and love of God. The cross represents submission to human nature. The *Aqedah* (the near-sacrifice of Isaac) is man's absolute mastery over his own nature.<sup>17</sup> "Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his ass . . . and set out" for the *Aqedah*. Don Isaac Abravanel, commenting upon Genesis 22:3, explains: "saddled his ass" means that he overcame his materiality, that is, his physical nature—a pun on the phonetically similar "hamor" (ass) and "homer" (matter).<sup>18</sup> This "matter" or nature includes all the benevolent sentiments as well as man's conscience; all the factors in man's makeup which an atheistic humanism regards as "good." In the morning benedictions, recited prior to reading the narrative of the *Aqedah*, we find the request: "Compel our *Yetzer* [inclination] to subject itself to you"—a request meant to apply to our benevolent as well as to our evil inclinations.<sup>19</sup> This would be a banal supplication were it concerned only with the evil inclinations. It was Abraham who first burst the bounds of the universal human bondage—the bondage of man to the forces of his own nature. Not everyone is Abraham, and not everyone is put to so terrible a test as that of the *Aqedah*. Nonetheless the daily performance of the Mitzvoth, which is not directed by man's natural inclinations or drives but by his intention of serving God, represents the motivation animating the *Aqedah*. From such a standpoint, the question "what does religion offer to me?"

must be completely dismissed. The only proper question is: "what am I obligated to offer for the sake of religion?"

In stark contrast to the Jewish religion, oriented as it is to the realities of human existence, stand religions which claim to offer the means of extricating man from the human condition and transporting him spiritually to a state governed by other categories of merit and obligation, of tasks and attainments. The Christian who believes in the event of the year 33 and has faith in it is redeemed; the very elements of his nature are altered. Among other things, he is liberated from the bondage of "the Law." Halakhic Judaism does not recognize such a redemption. The project it sets for man is permanent and endless. No religious attainment may be considered final; the project is never completed. Observance of the Torah in its entirety is merely the training of man for continuation of its observance. No religious achievement can change the human condition or the task.

A tremendous symbolic exemplification of this attitude appears at the close of Yom Kippur. At the end of the Day of Atonement, the culmination of a period of repentance when the people of Israel purify themselves before their father in heaven and are purified by him—at the close of the *Ne'ilah* service with the public utterance of the verse of Shema and the blowing of the Shofar—the first words of the weekday evening prayer are uttered: "And He is merciful and forgiving of sin."<sup>20</sup> Thus the basic situation of repentant man at the close of the Day of Atonement is exactly what it was the evening before. His sole achievement consists of the great religious effort invested in this day. Immediately after he must begin his preparations toward the next Yom Kippur. The cycle continues until the end of one's life. In like manner one's labor in study of the Torah is not a means for the attainment of any other goal. This very labor is itself the goal. "Until what period of life ought he to study Torah? Until the day of his death."<sup>21</sup>

Halakhah, as an expression of a religiosity which rejects all illusion, does not entertain man with the vision of some target at which he may aim and which, once attained, constitutes the fulfillment of his tasks. No human achievement affects the regime of religious praxis under which one lives from coming of age until death. Performance of the Mitzvoth is man's path to God, an infinite path, the end of which is never attained and is, in effect, unattainable. A man is bound to know that this path never terminates. One follows it without advancing



beyond the point of departure. Recognition that the religious function imposed upon man is infinite and never ending is the faith which finds expression in the regularity, constancy, and perseverance in the performance of the Mitzvoth. The circle of religious praxis rotates constantly about its center. "Every day they will appear to you as new," for after each act the position of man remains as it was before. The aim of proximity to God is unattainable. It is infinitely distant, "for God is in heaven and you on the earth" (Eccles. 5:1). What then is the substance and import of the performance of the Mitzvoth? It is man's striving to attain the religious goal.

Halakhic observance as a way of life, a fixed and permanent form of human existence, precludes conversion of religion into a means to some ulterior end. Most of the Mitzvoth are meaningless except as expressions of worship. They have no utility in terms of satisfaction of human needs. No man would commit himself to such a way of life if he did not regard the service of God as an end in itself serving no extrinsic purpose. The Halakhah thus addresses a man's sense of duty rather than his emotions and inclinations. The Mitzvah of prayer—the obligatory routine prayer of institutional religion—can serve as proof. The concept of prayer has two different meanings: first, prayer in the sense of "a prayer of the afflicted when he is faint and pours out his complaint before God" (Ps. 102:1); second, prayer as defined in the prayerbook, which is more constitutive of Judaism than the Bible, since the latter was adopted by a large portion of humanity that did not embrace Judaism. The prayerbook, which determines the content of the Mitzvah of prayer, does not express the spontaneous outpouring of the soul. It contains a text of fixed prayer, imposed upon one as a duty and not conditioned by his spiritual or material needs or by his feeling. The same eighteen benedictions are recited by the bridegroom before his wedding ceremony, by the widower returning from the funeral of his wife, and the father who has just buried his only son. Recitation of the identical set of psalms is the daily duty of the person enjoying the beauties and bounty of this world and the one whose world has collapsed. The same order of supplications is prescribed for those who feel the need for them and those who do not.

The prayerbook is the outcome of a weighty religious decision. One of the Tanna'im (Sages of the Mishnaic period) demanded: "Do not

make a routine of your prayer, but let it consist in supplication of mercy before God."<sup>22</sup> He opposed the fixed formulas of the prayerbook. But the halakhic decision was to regard prayer as the obligatory service of God, not as spontaneous expression. "Let him gird up strength like a lion to rise in the morning for the service of his Creator" (the first clause of the *Shulhan Arukh*, an authoritative code of Halakhah). Only as service can prayer be collective. "A prayer of the afflicted when he is faint" is individual and necessarily varies with the person and the changing contingent circumstances.

Proponents of an "authentic religiosity" maintain that the religious function of prayer can only be realized if the fixed formulas of prayer are abolished and each person prays only when he feels the need and desire to express his feelings and thoughts of the moment. The representative of institutional religion will reply that he has no religious interest in a prayer which is not the fulfillment of a religious obligation. Supplicatory outpouring of the soul is a psychological phenomenon, religiously irrelevant. That prayer is great which a person views as work and executes regardless of whether or not it suits his taste. Everyone is capable of reciting verses of praise when in good spirits. To utter many Hallelujahs when one finds no joy in nature or in his life is the act of the truly religious person, committed to prayer imprinted with the stamp of the Sages.<sup>23</sup>

The writings of Rabbi Kook assert the superiority of the Torah, that is, the Halakhah, to prophecy, the spirit of which he finds in Aggadah.<sup>24</sup> Prophecy occurs within the interior of a man's soul. Hence it may flow from the spirituality of man and be conveyed by man. The Torah, however, with its orientation to practice, must be given directly to God. This is one of the fundamental distinctions between Judaism and Christianity. The latter reversed the order of superiority and prefers the prophets to the Torah.

If the Mitzvoth are in the service of God, not of man, they may not be directed toward the satisfaction of human wants. Any attempt to ground them in human needs—cognitive, moral, social, and national—deprives them of their religious meaning. If the commandments were expressions of philosophic cognition, had a moral function, or were directed at the perfection of the social order or the conservation of the people of Israel, the observant Jew would be doing service to himself,



to society, or to the nation. Instead of serving God he would be utilizing God's Torah for his own benefit as an instrument for satisfying his needs.

Consequently, the idea of "reasons for the Mitzvoth" is a theological concept, not a concept of religious faith. The rationale of a Mitzvah is service of God, not a utilitarian interest. Were the significance of the Sabbath social or national, it would be entirely superfluous. It was not to perform this function that the *Shekhinah* [the divine presence] descended on Mount Sinai; certainly not to replace politicians and intelligence officers in charge of national security. If its meaning is not holiness, the Sabbath has no significance whatsoever. But holiness is a category which is meaningless in a humanitarian or anthropocentric context.

The foregoing considerations apply equally to the ethical importance the secularists attribute to the Torah and its commandments. Ethics, when regarded as unconditionally asserting its own validity, is an atheistic category *par excellence*. A person who is ethical in this sense regards man as the supreme end and value, that is, deifies man. A person who perceives man as one among God's creatures and keeps in mind the verse, "I have set God always before me," cannot accept ethics as the overriding norm or criterion. Being moral, from the standpoint of a secular ethic, can have only either of two meanings; directing man's will in accordance with man's knowledge of reality—the ethics of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans and especially the Stoics, and among the later philosophers Spinoza; or directing man's will in accordance with man's recognition of his duty—the ethics of Kant and the German idealists. Among the passages of the Shema we find the words: "that you seek not after your own hearts and your own eyes": "after your own hearts" is the negation of Kantian ethics; "after your own eyes" is the negation of Socrates'. The admonition: "I am the Lord your God" follows shortly thereafter. The Torah does not recognize moral imperatives stemming from knowledge of natural reality or from awareness of man's duty to his fellow man. All it recognizes are Mitzvoth, divine imperatives. The Torah and the prophets never appeal to the human conscience, which harbors idolatrous tendencies. No equivalent of the term "conscience" appears in Scripture. The counsel of conscience is not a religious concept. The "God in one's heart" which humanist moralists sometimes invoke is a "strange god."

Halakhah as a religious institution cannot admit the category of the ethical. Needless to say, it cannot admit the utilitarian justification, whether it be for the good of individuals, of society, or of the nation. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" is the great rule in the Torah not because it is a precept transcending the formalism of law and above the Mitzvoth but precisely because it appears as one of the 613 Mitzvoth. As a guide rule, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" is not specific to Judaism. Similar precepts were laid down in writing by thinkers who were not influenced by Judaism and were not even acquainted with it, by the wise men of China, India, and Greece. Moreover, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" does not, as such, occur in the Torah. The reading is: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am God."

The duty of love toward one's neighbor is not a corollary of man's position as such but of his position before God. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" without the continuation "I am God" is the great rule of the atheist Kant. The novelty and grandeur of this rule in the Torah consists in the framework within which the Torah places it. That context includes Mitzvoth as various as those occurring in the Ten Commandments, laws concerned with sacrificial rites, others regarding property rights or rights of a worker to prompt payment of his wages, prohibition of interbreeding species of animals and plants, and so on, all within the span of twenty verses (Lev. 15). "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" ceases thereby to be mere good counsel, a noble aspiration or sublime ideal. It becomes clothed in the reality of law, something one is compelled to take seriously as one must take police ordinances seriously. There is nothing deprecatory about this simile. None other than Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai upon his deathbed blessed his disciples: "May your fear of Heaven be no less than your fear of human authority."<sup>25</sup> As misleading as the truncated quotation regarding love of neighbor is the distorted injunction, "And you shall do the good and right." The verse reads: "And you shall do the good and right in the eyes of God"! (Deut. 6:18).

What does the religious person achieve by observing the Mitzvoth? The last chapter of the prophetic books says: "Then you shall return and see the difference between him that serves God and him that does not serve him" (Mal. 3:18). Halakhic praxis is the active way in which man may serve God. It is the only way for man to acknowledge the



Kingdom of Heaven. So long as a person's religiosity expresses only his personal awareness, his conscience, his morality, or his values, the religious act is merely for himself and, as such, is an act of rebellion against the Kingdom of Heaven. Service of God through Torah and Mitzvoth and worship of "God in the heart" or the "conscience" of humanistic religion are in sheer opposition. The latter is worship of man, nothing other than the idolatry referred to by the verse "that you seek not after your own heart." Anything a man does to satisfy his own needs, whether material or spiritual, is self-service, not divine service. As such it is perfectly legitimate. But if a man attributes religious import to this act he is transforming God into a means and instrument for his own good. A man can worship God only by committing himself to observance of the Mitzvoth, which are the expression of the divine will and not means for the satisfaction of his needs, not even of his spiritual needs. A typical act of serving God would be the wearing of the phylacteries and, in doing so, observing all the detailed prescriptions pertaining to them such as the requirement that they be cubical, that the straps be black, and so on. For himself, a man has no motivation for performing this act and there could be no other motivation than compliance with the will of God, who commanded the wearing of phylacteries. The same is true of Sabbath observance, with all its strange precepts which serve no physiological, social, or psychological needs. The activities forbidden on the Sabbath are determined not by the energy expended or the effort required but by criteria internal to the Halakhah. The only significance of the Sabbath is one having to do with holiness—subordination of a seventh part of one's life to a special rule of living which has no roots in human nature, its inclinations, or its needs, but follows only from the decision to accept the "yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven."<sup>26</sup> This is not a way of life that is natural to man, and the precepts governing it emphasize and highlight this difference. Hence the Sabbath loses its religious significance if the precepts relating to it are adjusted to suit the inclinations or comfort of men. All these considerations apply as well to the laws governing the sexual life of man and wife and the restrictions forbidding certain foods. None have a physiological or psychological rationale. All constitute constraints upon human nature in the interest of the service of God.

It follows that the Halakhah cannot and ought not to be adapted to the interests and natural needs of man.

At this point the problem of Mitzvoth, which have no physiological, philosophical, or sociological basis and follow neither from man's intellect nor from his affections or volitions, comes to bear on the problem of man's freedom. What is the status of a man as an autonomous being if he is committed to the Torah and its Mitzvoth? The claim that a man who accepts the authority of the Halakhah is in bondage is only too familiar. But the concept of bondage no less than that of freedom demands semantic analysis. "The regularity of the world order is constant."<sup>27</sup> Events in the world and the order in which they occur are governed by law, and things are connected by fixed functional relations. Recognition of the world order within which man is ordained to live and act is a profound religious insight and a necessary condition for subjection to the rule of Halakhah—as against belief in repeated interventions from above. If the world possesses constant regularity, man is subordinate to the entire system of natural reality, which includes not only his body but his soul.<sup>28</sup> He is subject to it both physiologically and psychologically. Under these circumstances, what is man's freedom? Willing acceptance of a way of life which does not derive from human nature implies the emancipation of man from the bondage of raw nature. Among the many definitions of human freedom, Spinoza's was philosophically the most profound: freedom is activity arising from the necessity of one's own nature. But does man have a nature of his own? As a natural being he is part of nature as a whole. His own nature is only the last link in a causal chain of the forces of inorganic and organic nature which act upon him and within him. Where then is man's autonomy? Man activated by his "own" nature is, in effect, nothing but a robot activated by the forces of nature, just like the cattle grazing in the pasture, which are also "free from the Torah and the Mitzvoth"; that is, from any law externally imposed. The Amoraite Rava tells us: "All bodies are sheaths; happy is he who has won the privilege of being a sheath for the Torah."<sup>29</sup> No man is simply "himself." He is always a receptacle for something which is other than "himself." The individual who regards himself as free of any heteronomously dictated imperative and acts out of Spinozistic



freedom is motivated by his nature, which is only one of the manifestations of nature in its totality. The psychological powers of man—his desires, inclinations, and volitions—are also part of his nature. From a religious point of view the triadic classification of being as nature, spirit, and God has no validity. There is only the dyad: nature, which includes the human spirit, and God. The only way man can break the bonds of nature is by cleaving to God; by acting in compliance with the divine will rather than in accordance with the human will. The latter is a natural factor. This disqualifies as idolatrous any religion oriented to values which reflect the aims and ideal vision of man. In contrast to its modern atheistic distortion, we must emphasize that the Hebrew Bible does not recognize the human spirit as the antithesis of the material. The well-known verse, which is nowadays usually quoted in a truncated form that perverts its meaning, does not confront matter with spirit but with the spirit of God: “not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit.” The human spirit is part of the “might” and “power.” The true meaning of the Tannaitic adage “None but he who busies himself with the Torah is free” is that he is free from the bondage of nature because he lives a life which is contrary to nature, both nature in general and human nature in particular. Hence there is neither a religious nor a philosophic need to assimilate halakhic practice to the concepts or interests of man. Their force lies precisely in their being alien to natural man. Rationalizations of the Mitzvoth and search for their origins are pointless. The only interest these researches serve is theological or psychological.

Emancipation from the bondage of nature can only be brought about by the religion of Mitzvoth. It cannot be accomplished by overcoming one's inclinations by rational or secular ethical considerations. True, the tendency to secularize all the traditional value-concepts has affected even the Aqedah. The term is prevalently used to designate heroic acts of self-sacrifice lacking any religious import, such as those of parents who sacrificed their children, or at least consented to their death, in the 1948 war of liberation. This is a misleading usage. The parents who overcame their pity and love suspended a human value out of deference to another human value which they themselves considered superior and justifying any sacrifice—the nation and the fatherland. This is entirely different from the Aqedah, in which all human values capable of being subsumed under the categories of human

understanding and feeling were set aside before the “glory of the majesty” of God.

Many oppose halakhic Judaism for religious reasons, as a “commandment of men learned by rote.” God desires the devotion of one's heart, and intention is more significant than anything else. Of what value is a religion which consists mainly in a way of life of exercise and training until it becomes second-nature? But bringing about second-nature is not a flaw in religion any more than it is in civic virtue. Only a small minority of men determine their way of life by conscious decision made in full awareness, and even they direct their actions by principles and conscious deliberation only on rare occasions—their moments of “poetry.” The prosaic affairs of life are conducted as a matter of routine, in accordance with customary patterns to which one has become habituated and by which one is unconsciously directed. Let us not disparage this rule of habit, for it, and not the rare decision and intention which attain to full consciousness, is the chief barrier to barbarism and brutality. If certain human societies have attained a modicum of decency in interpersonal relations and civic order and have become communities of “law-abiding citizens,” that is not due to their members' having suffered the perplexities and conducted the deliberations of Socrates in prison until they came to recognize that a person is obligated to abide by the laws of his state even when these are against his interests. It is the result of habituation to cultural practices. “That simply isn't done” is the classical expression of a norm learnt by habituation. Disparagement of “social superstitions,” of “meaningless routines” or “empty conventions” has only loosened the reins and set free forces of darkness and agents of horror which had been restrained only by customary routine. Our generation especially has learned that men are incapable of living a life fit for men by their own decision and on their own responsibility. This is no less true of the religious life. Only the prophet Isaiah, whose eyes had seen the King, Lord of Hosts, could allow himself to despise “a commandment of men learned by rote.” Most of us can only hope to put our lives in some relation to God through the traditionally communicated and habitually acquired formulas of halakhic practice. Once we are privileged to attain a religiosity of “commandment of men learned by rote” of “life in accordance with the *Shulhan Arukh*,” so vigorously repudiated by the proponents of “authentic religion,” we may continue to strive towards a



religiosity of intention and consciousness. Contempt of religion which binds the religious experience with laws and regulations and pursuit of the free expression of this experience have led to the most abominable depravities. How great was the religious feeling and how deep was the religious experience of idolaters who sacrificed their sons to Moloch and abandoned their daughters to the whoredom of the worship of Ashtoreth? The Torah invalidates such free, spontaneous, and natural religiosity with its implications of idolatry, incest, and bloodshed.<sup>30</sup> It imprisons them within the confines of the Mitzvoth ("binds them with the straps of the phylacteries," in the words of Saul Tchernikhowsky) and has no qualms about the danger of becoming an artificial system accepted as "a commandment of men learned by rote."

Life molded on the halakhic model demarcates a domain of things and deeds that pertain to holiness. Holiness, in the religious sense of this word as against its figurative secular meanings, is nothing but halakhic observance; the specific intentional acts dedicated to the service of God. Any other deed—whether regarded as good or bad, whether material or spiritual—that a man may perform in his own interest or for the satisfaction of a human need is profane. Sacred and profane are fundamental religious categories. Within institutional religion, the religion of Halakhah, the distinction between them is an essential aspect of religious perception. Conversely, the idea of holiness as an immanent property of certain things—persons, locations, institutions, objects, or events—is a magical-mystical concept which smacks of idolatry. There is no holiness outside the sphere of divinity, which is the sphere shaped by the divine imperative, not by human values; a sphere in which human action is dedicated to service of God. "God has nothing in his world beyond the four ells of Halakhah"—the sphere of actions directed by His commands. Nothing is holy in itself. There is only that which is "holy to God"; that which is sanctified by the distinct purpose of serving God. Only this meaning of "holiness" can be accommodated by halakhic Judaism. "You shall be holy" is demanded at the beginning of a portion of the Torah concerned mainly with Mitzvoth. "For you are a holy people" occurs in a context devoted in its entirety to halakhic practices.

One of the most cunning wiles of anthropocentric secularism, which hides behind the mask of "authentic religiosity," is to obliterate this

distinction and to extend the rubric of the holy to cover natural functions and human values. If holiness is incarnate in aspects of natural reality itself, or if forces and drives within man are holy, there is no room for "the holy God" who transcends natural reality, since then reality itself is divine and man himself is God. Abrogation of the distinctive religious category of holiness and imputation of sanctity to human functions and drives is one of the most vicious phenomena of our times, socially, educationally, and morally. This generation has been witness, as none other before it, to the evil which may be perpetrated in the name of fatherland, nation, honor, liberty, equality, and any other human value to which holiness is attributed when men lose sight of the great truth that holiness is resident in a realm which transcends human values. Hence the tremendous educational significance of the Mitzvoth, which demarcate the realm of the sacred in human life and are a constant reminder that anything outside that realm lacks sanctity and is unworthy of religious adoration. Our generation must keep nothing more constantly in mind than this.

Although it is only halakhic praxis which creates a sphere of the sacred within human life, outside this domain flourish many good deeds and events of grandeur and sublimity. They are good, great, and sublime, but cannot be sacred. They are always subject to evaluation and criticism from a religious standpoint, for only a religious requirement sanctioned by Halakhah is sacred. Fatherland, security, nation, liberty, honor, loyalty, beauty, conjugal love, parental love—if not defined and imposed by religious precept—may not be sanctified or represented as absolute values in the name of which anything may be permitted and for the sake of which everything must be done. By distinguishing the sacred from the profane the Halakhah functions as a bulwark against idolatry in all its manifestations and a defense against the corruption associated with it. For idolatry is simply the representation of things profane as sacred, as possessing supreme and absolute worth. Consider the nature of the "sanctity" of national security or the "sanctity" of military loyalty and discipline, in the wake of which we have Kafr Kasseem.<sup>31</sup> The tendency to sanctify elements of the profane, such as natural states or events, psychological drives, certain natural relations between man and man or man and society, is identical with the evil inclination of idolatry, of rebellion against the Kingdom of Heaven, of the deification of the world, of nature, and of man himself.



From a religious, theocentric life perception and world view, it follows that all that derives from man—his volitions, needs, and drives, whether material or spiritual—is profane and may not be sanctified. This is the meaning of “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain” when its full implications are understood. This understanding requires the Halakhah to determine what is holy, from which we may infer what is not holy.

Sanctification of natural reality expresses a world perception which is antireligious, atheistic or pantheistic. Thales of Miletus, the materialistic polytheist who declared that all things are full of gods was the spiritual father of the idea that “There is no place at all empty of Him.”<sup>32</sup> The echoes of this type of perception in Jewish mysticism are incompatible with halakhic Judaism. If holiness inheres in natural reality, there is no room for the introduction of sanctity from a source transcending nature, and none for the service of God by observance of the Mitzvoth.

From a didactic point of view, it is probable that a religion oriented to halakhic practice is capable of exerting a greater educative force than a religion consisting solely of beliefs and values. No doubt a religion of values, an “endowing religion” such as Christianity and forms of Judaism which resemble Christianity, is capable of gratifying certain psychic needs. Today, “seekers of religion” or “seekers of God” in order “to fill a vacuum in the soul” are legion. Such a religion is likely therefore to attain some popularity. It will never become an educative force. Men like comforting religions which require no effort, but they do not revere them or take them seriously. It is a basic psychological fact that men respect and adore only that which is demanding, which requires sacrifices and imposes duties. Comforting and congenial teaching is not likely to have a penetrating impact. Why do most people revere the fatherland? Not because of the benefits it confers, but because it requires its citizens to be ready to die in its defense. In like manner, the effectiveness of the “demanding” religion as an educative force is greater than that of the “endowing” ones. The great weakness of religious Jewry in the last generation is a result of having forgotten this truth in its education and propaganda. Instead, they tried to make Judaism acceptable to the public, and especially to the young people, by persuading them of the great benefit and utility the individual and

the Jewish community at large may derive from observance of the Torah.

We do not claim that education through halakhic practice guarantees the success of religious education. There is no recipe for attaining a desirable result through education analogous to getting a definite outcome from a chemical reaction. But there are factors which open up certain educational possibilities and others that block them. Jewish religious education is possible only if centered on the Mitzvoth, not otherwise.

Living in accordance with the Halakhah, demarcating a sphere of the sacred through halakhic practice—is this the ultimate end of the religious life? The answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, there can be no doubt that the end and perfection of religiosity, which the prophet calls “knowledge of God” and the psalmist “nearness of God,” are not a matter of conduct: “to this ultimate perfection there do not belong either actions or moral qualities . . . it consists only of opinions to which speculation has led and that investigation has rendered compulsory” (Maimonides).<sup>33</sup> The quest pertains to consciousness and inward intentionality. Accordingly, Maimonides identifies the Mitzvoth of the Torah, as it would seem, not with the “ultimate perfection” but with the preparatory perfections. In this sense, halakhic praxis is not the end of religion but only a means and method. But with a penetrating dialectic Maimonides converts the instrumental status of the Mitzvoth into the end of religion: “Know that all the practices of worship, such as reading the Torah, prayer and the performance of the other commandments, have only the end of training you to occupy yourself with His commandments, may He be exalted, rather than with matters pertaining to this world; as if you were occupied with Him, may He be exalted, and not with that which is other than He.”<sup>34</sup> After nine chapters (chaps. 26–34 of *Guide* III) discussing the “intention of the Torah,” which is to say the purpose of the Mitzvoth, and after fifteen chapters (35–49) devoted to clarifying the rationale of the particular precepts in terms of their utility for perfecting the condition of individuals and of society, Maimonides reveals the secret: the purpose of the Mitzvoth is to educate man to recognize that knowing God and cleaving to him consist in the practice of these very precepts, and this



constitutes the worship of God! This is also the meaning of the sentence in his commentary to the tenth chapter of the mishnaic Tractate *Sanhedrin*, "There is no other end to the (acquisition of) Truth than to know that it is true, and the Torah is true, and the purpose of knowing it is to observe it."

At the same time, the "ultimate perfection" of religion can never be realized. It always remains an eternal signpost indicating the right direction on an infinitely extended road. Man cannot observe the Torah in its entirety because it is divine, not human. Even the perfect man is unable to cleave to God, since he will never be able to remove the last barrier separating him from God, "his being an intellect existing in matter." Hence what is meant by "observance of the Torah" can only be the perpetual effort to observe it. In this respect the religious life resembles the work of the housewife; her job is endless, because whatever she does today she will have to do once more tomorrow. The eternal striving toward the religious goal, which is never attained, is embodied in the halakhic practice, which never ends. After all the effort invested in it, the scope of the remaining task is never diminished and the goal is never nearer no matter what distance one has covered in one's attempt to advance toward it. Every morning one must rise anew to the service of the Creator—the self-same service that one performed yesterday, and at the end of every Yom Kippur—after the great realization of repentance and atonement—the annual cycle of weekday Mitzvoth toward the next Yom Kippur begins anew. Thus halakhic observance, in itself a means to religious perfection is, in respect of man, the ultimate religious perfection of which he is capable.

One of the finest European writers and thinkers, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1789), said that if God gave him the choice between the truth and the eternal search for the truth, he would choose the latter, "for the genuine truth is known to God alone." Similarly, a great Jewish leader of the socialist movement said in regard to socialism: "The movement itself is everything, the goal nothing at all." In like manner, one representing the "religion of Mitzvoth" would say to the proponents of "authentic religiosity": the eternal pursuit of the religious goal by persevering in religious praxis is the be-all and the end-all of religion for man. "The end of the matter, when all is said and done: fear God and keep his Mitzvoth for that is the whole [attainment] of man" (Eccles. 12:13). The end itself is hidden by God. Rabbi

Kook put it this way: "If man is always likely to stumble . . . that does not detract from his perfection, since the essence of his perfection is the aspiration and the constant desire to attain perfection."<sup>35</sup> His disciple, Rabbi Jacob Moshe Harlap, elaborates on this statement almost in the same words as Lessing's, whose works he had never read: "the desire is more of an end than is the achievement, especially according to Maimonides, who explains that there is no end other than He, may his Name be exalted. It follows that, essentially, the end is the aspiration to attainment of the goal . . . and we must prefer the search for wisdom to its attainment."<sup>36</sup> "Precisely the mediacy is the goal . . . to know how to appreciate the effort more than the attainment of the imaginary end; for, truth to say, there is no end and mediacy is the chief desideratum and the truest end."<sup>37</sup>