

# The epistemology of religiosity: an Orthodox Jewish perspective

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**Abstract** This paper focusses on the Rabbinic suggestion that the attitude of awe, rather than any particular belief, lies at the heart of religiosity. On the basis of these Rabbinic sources, and others, the paper puts forward three theses: (1) that belief is not a sufficiently absorbing epistemic attitude to bear towards the truths of religion; (2) that much of our religious knowledge isn't mediated via belief; and (3) that make-believe is sometimes more important, in the cultivation of religiosity than is mere belief.

**Keywords** Judaism · Religiosity · Make-belief · Midrash · Epistemology

'Religiosity' has at least two senses. One sense of the word is purely sociological. You are religious if you belong to a religious community. Such belonging might be contingent upon certain outward signs of compliance with religious doctrine and law, but the notion is, ultimately, sociological. Borrowing from the Yiddish, Jewish people will often call a person who is religious in this sense, 'frum'. The other sense of 'religiosity' has to do with the psychological and spiritual condition of the *homo religious*. Very often, people who are religious in the first sense fail to be religious in the second sense.

Even in cases of the most sincere forms of *frumkeit*, sincerely frum people often achieve real religiosity only fleetingly. In this paper, I shall be addressing religiosity rather than frumkeit, and, I shall be exploring its epistemology.<sup>1</sup> My thoughts on these

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<sup>1</sup> I recognise that I use the term 'epistemology' slightly eccentrically—normally, we think of epistemology as the study of belief and knowledge in terms of evidence, warrant and justification. I relate to epistemology, in this paper, to include that study, but also to include an investigation of the nature of the relations that stand between us and the content of our belief/knowledge—what might be called the metaphysics of epistemology. Thanks to Howard Wettstein for helping me to see the need to make this clarification.

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matters emerge from reflection upon Jewish texts and Orthodox Jewish practices, and thus my perspective on these issues will have a Jewish flavour. Accordingly, instead of talking about religiosity in the abstract, I shall focus upon the epistemological component of life as a religious Orthodox Jew.<sup>2</sup> But, it is my fervent hope that my conclusions will shed light upon the nature of religiosity in general.

In this paper, I make the following three claims about the epistemology of religiosity:

1. Even when the religious Jew believes in a proposition, belief is not enough to characterise the situation. The religious Jew doesn't just believe; he/she tries to *make-believe*.
2. Belief is an impoverished notion; much of our most important religious knowledge isn't mediated via belief.
3. There are many situations in which the religious Jew doesn't have to believe at all, but he/she still has to make-believe.

In time, I will explain and defend each of these theses, but first, we have to say a few words about the nature of religiosity.

### Religiosity and holiness

According to Jewish tradition, the Bible contains 613 commandments, and Rabbinic law adds many more layers of restriction and obligation. Jewish law is known as *halakha*. Obviously, one of the essential ingredients of a religious Jewish life is going to be halakhic observance. Part of Jewish religiosity is to strive with every fibre of one's being to obey and to fulfil these commandments. Nevertheless, although the effort to be halakhically observant *might* be sufficient to help you gain entrance into frum society, it won't be sufficient to make you religious. It is necessary, but it isn't sufficient.

In the book of Leviticus (19:2), the Torah commands the Jewish people to be holy.<sup>3</sup> Nahmanides, in his classic commentary to this verse, goes out of his way to explain why this commandment was necessary. One might think that if you keep all of the other 612 commandments, you'd be holy by default. Given that assumption, you might think it bizarre that the Torah then commands you, in addition to the other 612 commandments, to be holy. Nahmanides contends that the assumption is simply false: it is possible to be quite a disgusting creature with the permission of the Torah, so to speak. That's to say: you can keep all of the other commandments and still somehow fall short. You can be frum, and yet lacking. In order to define *religiosity*, I want to explore this extra ingredient that we're supposed to strive for above and beyond halakhic observance narrowly conceived. Above and beyond all that, we're supposed to strive for holiness. So, what is holiness?

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of brevity, I will talk about religious Orthodox Jews, in the remainder of this paper, simply as 'religious Jews'—I recognize, and do not seek to deny, that there are many religious Jews who are not Orthodox, but belong to the Conservative, or Reform (or to other Jewish) movements. This paper, however, only focuses explicitly on life as a religious Orthodox Jew; though my conclusions will, I hope have ramifications for our understanding of religiosity in general.

<sup>3</sup> At least, this is the classical Jewish understanding of the verse.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1955, p. 77) points out that in Judaism, we less often speak of a person being a *believer* than we speak of them being a *yore shamayim*—as somebody who stands in awe of the heavens; or a *yore Hashem*—somebody who stands in awe of God.<sup>4</sup> It seems like *awe* is an attitude that plays an even more central role than belief, in the constitution of a religious Jew. Howard Wettstein was inspired by this insight to reflect upon the nature of awe. He draws four examples of awe that people experience in their everyday lives, such that even if you weren't a religious person, you might be able to get a handle over what this emotion, or attitude, of awe, really is (Wettstein 2012, p. 30):

1. **Awe at natural grandeur:** “the feeling of an astronaut standing on the moon, or somebody powerfully moved by the night sky at the top of a mountain, or a relevantly similar ocean experience.”
2. **Awe at human grandeur:** “awe at the power of people to find inner resources in horrible circumstances, awe at human goodness and caring ... powerful responses to great art ... or to great achievements in science, mathematics, philosophy.”
3. **Awe at the birth of one's children:** to witness the birth of a child is an awesome experience. Wettstein points out that this category of awe might be a combination of the first two categories: there is the awe of nature, and there's also the awe inspired by the woman who managed to bring the new life into the world.
4. **Awe of type 1 compounded by awe of type 2:** “For example, one at the top of the mountain, awestruck not only by the overwhelming beauty and majesty of nature, but also by the fact that humans, constructed of the stuff of the mountain, can take such a thing in, and indeed that we can feel awe at it.”

Wettstein (2012, p. 33) then makes an interesting suggestion that brings us back to our topic of holiness and religiosity: “For many people, and not only those who would consider themselves religious, there is something *holy* about the objects of awe experience – childbirth, a great symphony, the Grand Canyon. There is, moreover, a feeling of horror associated with the thought of destroying such objects, events, and so on. To do so – even to allow such a thing – would be sacrilege.” Even if you were an atheist, you might find it appropriate to use words associated with sanctity—such as holiness—when talking about objects of awe. Somebody who didn't even believe in God might use the following sort of language: ‘That would be sacrilege! To fill the Grand Canyon in with concrete in order to build a multi-story car park?! Sacrilege!’ What interests Wettstein here is that attitudes of awe towards an object seem to go hand in hand with the appropriateness of calling that object holy.<sup>5</sup> So, we have reason

<sup>4</sup> As he puts it: “Awe rather than faith is the cardinal attitude of the religious Jew.”

<sup>5</sup> Now, a teenager might think that a sports-star, or a film-star, is awesome without thinking them to be holy. I would want to argue that here, we've slipped into a derivative sense of the word 'awesome'; one not so linked to the attitude of wonder; but one would need to take care here to avoid circularity: we don't mean to define a new sense of 'awe' in terms of holiness, and then point out a trivial correlation. Instead, I mean to point to a pre-existing correlation between awe and holiness.

to believe that these concepts are related. I want to flesh this idea out by looking at three *Midrashim* (traditional Rabbinic homiletic interpretations of the Hebrew Bible).

Our first Midrash comes from the collection called *Shemot Rabba* (38:7):

Rabbi Hannina said: A holy one will come and enter into the holy place, and sacrifice before the Holy One, and atone for the holy people. *A holy one will come* – this refers to Aaron [the priest], as it is said: ‘Aaron the holy one of the Lord’ (Psalm 106:16). *And enter into the holy place* – this refers to the Sanctuary, as it is said: ‘The Sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established’ [the word for ‘Sanctuary’ here – *mikdash* – shares its root with the word for holiness] (Exodus 15:17). *And sacrifice before the Holy One* – this refers to the Holy One, Blessed be He, as it is said, ‘for Holy am I, the Lord your God’ (Leviticus 19:2). *And atone for the holy people* – this refers to the Israelites, as it is said, ‘You shall be holy’ (Leviticus 19:2).<sup>6</sup>

What is Rabbi Hannina trying to tell us that we didn’t already know? There’s certainly a poetic quality to Rabbi Hannina’s statement, with its rhythmic repetition of the word, ‘holy’, but there doesn’t seem to be any new idea. We know that the service of the priest in the Temple was aimed at atoning for the sins of the Israelites. Perhaps the key to unlocking the hidden significance of his statement lies in the proof-texts that the Midrash uses in order to substantiate Rabbi Hannina’s use of the word ‘holy’. He uses the word four times to refer to Aaron, the Sanctuary, God and the Jewish people respectively. The verse in Psalms that refers to Aaron as holy (Psalm 106:16) is supposed to anchor the first reference. The fact that the Torah refers to the Sanctuary as the *mikdash* is supposed to anchor the second reference (Exodus 15:17). That God calls himself holy in Leviticus (19:2) is supposed to anchor the third reference. The fourth reference is supposed to be anchored by the fact that the Jewish people were told, ‘You shall be holy’ (Leviticus 19:2).

Of course, it barely needs proving that Aaron was holy, or that the sanctuary was holy, or, of course, that God is holy, and yet the verses that are offered are incontrovertible. The only proof-text that doesn’t seem convincing is the one that we needed the most. How do we know that the Jewish people are holy? The source that the Midrash provides, Leviticus 19:2, is far from convincing. There are many verses that the Midrash could have chosen to illustrate the holiness of the Jewish people, but this verse doesn’t seem to do the job at all. The fact that we’re commanded to be holy doesn’t mean that we’re holy. In fact, if anything, it’s an indication that we’re not yet holy, or that our holiness is at risk. If our holiness were assured, why would we need this commandment? You wouldn’t tell somebody to be holy if they were already securely holy. And thus, to my mind, this final verse introduces a surprising note of contingency into the picture that Rabbi Hannina sketches.

If we want to make Rabbi Hannina’s words significant, rather than leaving him saying something trivial and obvious, and if we want to give due weight to the note of contingency thrown up by the final proof-text, we might want to interpret his words as follows: all of the holinesses here are contingent upon each other. The Midrash seems

<sup>6</sup> All translations of classical Hebrew sources, in this paper, are mine alone.

to be alluding to the mutuality of holiness. Somehow, none of the characters in this quartet—God, the Jewish people, Aaron, and the Temple—can be holy without the other. They seem to be in a dance with one another; dependent upon one another.

Of course, there is a sense in which God is inalterably and inherently holy. Even in this Midrash, his name is *The Holy One*, and, thus, even by the lights of the Midrash, there is a sense in which God is defined by His essential property of holiness. But, the Midrash also seems to be introducing us to another variety of holiness—holiness as a relational property. This new type of holiness isn't an essential property, but something that is bestowed upon another by the attitude that is held towards it—because we are all awestruck by the grand canyon, it *becomes* holy—because God sanctifies the seventh day, it *becomes* holy.<sup>7</sup> There needs to be an act of sanctification. It's no limitation upon God to say that He doesn't have this new variety of holiness inherently, because nothing can. To be holy, in this new sense of the word at least, you need to be made holy by another. The Jewish people make God holy.

It is strange to think that slaughtering animals in a tent in the middle of a desert is *inherently* holy. It is difficult to say that dry halakhic observance makes people holy, if they're not holy themselves. Is my putting phylacteries on in the morning saturated with holiness if in all other respects, I'm a reprehensible person? It might make me frum, but does it make me religious? Aaron and the temple and the service of the temple (for which we could substitute the commandments in general) are not holy unless the Jewish people are holy. Conversely, it says that the Jewish people can't be holy without Aaron and the temple and the temple service. According to this Midrash, you can't be holy just by being a really nice person; you also need to be engaged with the service of God.

Many secular Jews feel that the key message of their Jewish religious heritage is to love the widow and the orphan and to engage in social justice; that if you're doing all that, you don't really need the other commandments.<sup>8</sup> This Midrash speaks to them. It tells them that they might be wonderfully good and decent people, but they won't be holy. Holiness is a package deal. Social activism doesn't make you holy, nor are you holy just in virtue of dry halakhic observance; you need both. There is this quartet: the priest, the place, God, and the people; and, in a magical moment of joint attention, when all of the pieces fit together, in that moment, holiness emerges collectively.

Noting how holiness only seems to emerge when everything takes its rightful place in this quartet, a Wettstein-reading of this Midrash might say the following: Holiness emerges when you adopt the right attitude to the world around you, and when others adopt that attitude towards you. If you view God with awe, and therefore make Him holy, He will reciprocate, and you will be holy too. If you view the commandments with awe, then they will become holy, and they, in turn, will make you holy.

There is a famous dispute between Rashi and Nahmanides as to what the commandment to be holy actually means in practice. Nahmanides, as we have seen, explains it as a commandment to transcend the dry letter of the law, and to ensure, that, in

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 2:3.

<sup>8</sup> Albert Einstein (2007, p. 90) adds another few details to the list when he says that, "The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice, and the desire for personal independence—these are features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my lucky stars that I belong to it."

addition to your observance of the other 612 commandments, you strive to act as a good person. Rashi, in his commentary to the verse, basically says that what it means to be holy is simply to run away from sins of a sexual nature. To put it cynically, Rashi says that prudishness and holiness are synonymous. The more of a prude you are, the more holy you are. This, I admit, is caricature of Rashi, to whom I will later come back and defend. For Nahmanides, to be holy isn't merely to run away from the desires of the flesh. To be holy is to be a decent human being. To be holy is to engage in acts of social justice, in acts of kindness and love to your fellow human being; to be holy isn't merely to be a prude.

The question is: have we understood Rashi correctly? One of Rashi's source-texts was a Midrash from *Vayikra Rabba* (24:6). In a shocking part, that Rashi doesn't quote, it is asked why Elisha the prophet was called 'holy' by the Shunamite woman:

Rabbi Joshua, son of Levi, brought a proof from the case of the Shunamite woman. This is what is written (II King 4:9): 'And she said to her husband, Behold now, I know that he is a holy man of God'. Rabbi Jonah said: ['he is a holy man' implies that] he was a holy man, but that his servants were not holy. As it is written (II Kings 4): 'Gehazi [Elisha's servant] came near to push her away' – in pushing her away, he touched her breasts.<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Eivon says that [the fact that the Shunamite woman called Elisha holy] proves that he never once gazed at her. And, the Rabbis say that she [the Shunamite woman] never once found a nocturnal emission on his bed sheets.

The Shunamite woman calls Elisha holy because he didn't grope her. This seems to place the bar for holiness pretty low. If you don't sexually molest somebody, then you're holy. Surely Elisha's claim to holiness was much loftier than that. Furthermore, the general attitude of this Midrash seems to be that holy people are as far removed from sexual desire as you can imagine. This is how the Midrash begins:

Rabbi Judah, son of Pazi, said: Why are the commandments concerning illicit sexual relations (Leviticus 18) juxtaposed with the laws of holiness (Leviticus 19)? Only to teach you that where-ever you find people erecting barriers against sexual licentiousness, there too will you find holiness. This goes along with the saying of Rabbi Judah, son of Pazi: Any person who erects barriers against sexual licentiousness, is called a holy person.

Let's take this view—which seems to be Rashi's view—seriously, and let's ask why: why does holiness come hand in hand with preventative measures against sexual licentiousness? In order to answer this question, let's go back to Wettstein's point about holiness. Holiness is associated with awe. It's associated with an attitude or a posture towards the world. If you could bottle that feeling that you have when you're at the Grand Canyon, and adopt that attitude towards all people, objects and events, then you would see holiness all around you; and, given the reciprocity of holiness that

<sup>9</sup> This is inferred from a play on words that doesn't easily translate. The verb used in the verse for pushing away is *lehodfa*, and the Midrash reads into this the words, *hod she-be-yofiyah*, which means, 'the majesty of her beauty'.

we saw alluded to in the last Midrash, you too would become holy. So, why is running away from desires of the flesh, an essential component of this thing called holiness?

Awe is a relatively easy bubble to burst. It's easy to make any situation feel absurd. All you have to do is to stand outside of the situation for a moment. Imagine: you're holding the baseball bat in an important game—the final of the World Series—and just as the pitcher launches the ball towards you, you think, 'Isn't this ridiculous? I'm being paid a load of money to hold this really thin strip of wood, in the hope that I might be able to hit this really small ball that's hurtling towards me at a ridiculous speed.' Thinking those thoughts, you'd be struck by the absurdity of the moment, and you probably wouldn't be able to hit the ball. What you have to do, is to ignore that annoying voice that's trying to burst the bubble of your concentration and inject absurdity into the situation.

An anecdote: I remember sitting in a fascinating class by a gifted teacher; the room was packed and I was thoroughly enjoying the content of the talk; when all of a sudden, looking at all of the people in the room, my attention was drawn to their heads, and I had the thought, 'what a lot of skulls and brains there are in this room.' The thought completely ruined my experience, because the room was transformed into a room of skulls and brains. I couldn't concentrate on anything else. This is something that has fascinated existentialist philosophers: the ease with which a situation can be made to feel absurd. In fact, John Paul Sartre's *Nausea* is a novel that pays a great deal of attention to the phenomenon. The book follows a character, Antoine Roquentin, with the uncanny ability to make any experience feel absurd. And, we can do that too. You just have to try, for a moment, as it were, to stand outside of the situation.

What we do in those moments of perceived absurdity is to treat things merely as objects, and to strip them of their social statuses and their socially constructed properties. You treat the baseball bat just as a stick of wood, or the football as a bundle of pig skin, and then the whole surrounding social structure that is baseball or football just seems to collapse in under the pressure of its own absurdity. There was a room full of people, but as soon as I looked at them as skulls and brains, the situation became absurd. I didn't see the people anymore. Part of what you do when you ruin a moment and make it absurd, is to treat the things in that moment merely as objects.

The cardinal example of when we turn something into an object that shouldn't be an object is in sexual sins. This happens on two levels. The first is the most obvious: you see somebody that you find sexually attractive, and you start to relate to them, not as a person, but as a desirable object. The objectification involved in pornography and prostitution would stand out as extreme exemplars of this phenomenon; where people become objects. But, in the cases that the Torah mentions, the objectification often happens on two levels. When a brother and a sister sleep with each other—an example I chose because most of the illicit relationships listed in Leviticus are incestuous—what transpires is that not only have they objectified one another—treating people as objects—but they have also ruined a pre-existing human relationship. You can't be a brother and a sister if you're also lovers. You have burst the familial nature of that relationship; stripped it of its social status.

Rashi's idea might be this: the key to holiness is an attitude; the attitude is related to awe; and, the attitude is the antithesis of objectifying things. I would argue that Rashi and Nahmanides' positions quickly collapse into one another, or even, that Rashi's

position includes and goes beyond that of Nahmanides. For, if you were the kind of person who could never objectify another, not even in the realm of sexuality, where the temptation is greatest; if, when you went out to buy a piece of clothing only to find out that it was a product of Indian slave labour, you couldn't bring yourself to buy it because you *know* that cheap labour isn't just a resource, but it is the degradation of other human beings; if you couldn't bring yourself to buy factory farmed meat because of the awe in which you hold the animal kingdom; if you're holy because you see holiness in others, never failing to be struck by the prism of awe through which other people, and the entire created world, deserve to be viewed, then you simply can't bring yourself to act in immoral ways. If you constantly adopt this attitude and this posture towards the world, then you couldn't fail to be an ethical person. You'd be more than that, you'd be holy.<sup>10</sup>

This attitude towards sexuality can be taken to negative extremes. William Kolbrener (2012), who lives in an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, tells a story about helping a woman, in his community, up many flights of stairs with heavy shopping. In that society, the genders live ever more segregated life-styles. Accordingly, she wouldn't look at him to acknowledge him or to thank him. He talks about how sexualised such a society must be. Gender and sexuality has to be on your mind the whole time: don't look; don't look; don't look. If you end up thinking like that, then you have forbidden matters on your mind almost constantly. The stereotypical ultra-orthodox reaction to sexuality is thus a cure that is so powerful that it brings back the original malady. People, once again, end up objectifying each other. As I understand Rashi and the Midrashic tradition, the factor that brings about holiness *isn't* prudishness, for that can go too far, but it is the refusal to turn another person into an object. If you become too prudish, you begin to objectify people once again. A society, like the Ultra-Orthodox communities that insist on having gender segregation on public transport, that reduces a woman to *back-of-the-bus-fodder*, so aware of a person's gender, may be a frum society, but it is not a holy society. It is a society that objectifies people. It is a highly sexualised society.

One more Midrash, more than either of the other two, cements this view of holiness into place. This Midrash, from *Vayikra Rabba* (14:5) is fascinating for many reasons, not least because it seems to have its own Jewish theory of original sin. The midrash reads as follows:

'When a woman conveys...' (Leviticus 12:2). This relates to that which is written: 'Behold, I was brought forth in sin [and in sin did my mother conceive me]' (Psalm 51:7). Rabbi Acha said, 'Even if one be the most pious of the pious, it's impossible that he should have no streak of iniquity in him.' David said before the Holy One, Blessed be He, 'Lord of the Universe! Did my father Jesse have the intention of bringing me into the world? Why, his only intention was personal enjoyment. The proof for this is that when they had both had their desires satisfied, he turned his face in one direction, and she turned her face in the opposite direction and it was you that caused every single drop to enter', and

<sup>10</sup> As Howard Wettstein put the point to me in conversation: awe gives rise to imperatives.



this is what David meant when he said: ‘For when my father and my mother forsook me, the Lord did gather me in’ (Psalm 27:10).

King David’s parents weren’t bothered to conceive that night. They were just interested in satiating their own desires, evidenced by the fact that they turned away from each other as soon as the act was done. It was God who caused the sperm to penetrate the egg; long after Jesse and his wife had finished what they had set out to do. It was God who gathered David in. But remember that the beginning of this Midrash is about being conceived in sin. So what was the sin here? Jesse and his wife can’t be blamed for the fact that God was necessary for the conception to occur—presumably, on the world view of the Midrash, this is always the case. The sin here, it seems, was that they turned away from each other; evidence of the fact that this wasn’t a moment of deep interpersonal connection between Jesse and his wife, but a moment of mutual self-satisfaction. They were using one another. It’s not sex that’s the problem, but objectification. What would the remedy be to this? Had Jesse and his wife, after their physical satisfaction, looked meaningfully into one another’s eyes, and maybe even thought about the enormity of the situation that a child might be about to come into the world as a result of this holy union; had that been the dynamic of that moment, we wouldn’t have been able to say that David was conceived in sin.

These Midrashim, read together, make a cumulative case for Wettstein’s approach to holiness. Holiness emerges when people behold the world, and everything in it, through the attitude of awe. You can be a good person without being holy. But, you can’t be holy without being a good person. Elisha wasn’t merely holy because he refrained from molesting the Shunamite woman. Rather, he was holy because such an act was the complete antithesis of his character. He saw the image of God reflected in every corner of the creation. He was unable to view anything without an attendant attitude of awe. So, it was impossible for him to reduce a human being into an object for physical gratification; he would not gaze at a woman’s body as if it were an inanimate work of art. Nocturnal emissions were impossible for him because sexuality was only ever relevant in the context of real inter-personal intimacy. Elisha was holy. Most of us only reach this state fleetingly, when we are overcome by awe. Most of the time, sincere *frum* people, are trying to be religious. When they are filled with awe for God and his creation, and when the sensation is so overwhelming that they cannot possibly act in conflict with it, then, in those moments, they are actually succeeding.

With this analysis of religiosity in hand, we can move on to the three arguments of this paper.

### **Thesis 1: belief and make-belief**

My first thesis is that even when belief is really important to the life of a religious Jew, it’s never merely belief. For, of course, there are things that a Jew has to believe. If he doesn’t believe them, he can’t be considered to be *frum*, let alone religious. The most central such belief is the belief in the existence of God. You simply cannot be a *frum* or religious Jew if you don’t believe in God. But, even in cases like this, belief isn’t

enough to make you religious. In order to illustrate this point, I want to quote Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's commentary to Exodus 20:2; his commentary to the first of the Ten Commandments, seemingly, a commandment to believe in God.

If this verse is to be taken as a commandment, he argues, it cannot be read as 'I am the Lord your God.' Instead, it must be read as 'I, the Lord, shall be your God.' You must *make* me your God. And thus this commandment lays the "basis for our entire relationship to God, constituting the duty that our sages call קבלת עול מלכות שמים, accepting the yolk of God's kingship." This isn't merely a commandment to believe, it's a commandment to make God your God; to accept his sovereignty over your life; to submit to him. Obviously, this flies in the face of the medieval commentaries who often took this commandment to be a commandment to believe/know. As far as Maimonides is concerned, you haven't fulfilled this commandment until you have convinced yourself rationally that God exists.<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Hirsch (2009, Exodus 20:2) thought this was wrong:

What the philosophers ancient and modern call the belief in the existence of God is as remote as can be from the meaning of this verse regarding the foundations of Jewish thought and Jewish life. The fundamental truth of Jewish life is not belief in God's existence or that God is one and only one. It is rather that the one and only God, the God of truth, is my God. He created and formed me, He gave me my standing, He informed me of my duty, and He continues to create me and to form me, to keep me, to guide me, and to lead me. My belief is not that my connection to Him is through an endless chain of events as a chance product of a universe of which He was the first cause aeons ago. Rather, my belief is that every breath that I take and that every moment of my existence is a direct gift of His power and love, and that my duty is to devote every moment of my life to His service alone.

That is what the first of the Ten Commandments amounts to. There are some beliefs that we have that you can just put into your belief box, and then you don't have to think about them again. I believe that smoking causes cancer. I rarely think about that belief. It's just there, unconsciously waiting until somebody asks me, 'Do you believe that smoking causes cancer?' to which, I'll respond, 'Yes, I do.' Despite the fact that I constantly believe it, I'm not constantly thinking about the belief or its content. It's a belief that demands no attention from me. The belief that you have chronic back pain, on the other hand, is of a very different nature. You can't hold that belief without being constantly aware of that which you believe. It would never be appropriate to respond to the question, 'Do you believe that you're in chronic back-pain?' with the response, 'Oh, Gosh, yes, I suppose I do.' Regarding other beliefs, you can be surprised to realise that you have them, but that cannot be the case with some beliefs, such as the belief that you have chronic back pain because the content of some beliefs forces itself upon your experience.

For Rabbi Hirsch, the point of the first of the Ten Commandments isn't merely to believe that God exists. You can have that belief and barely be aware of the fact that

<sup>11</sup> Cf., Sefer Hamitzvot, Mitvot Aseh, 1.

you believe it. Rather, the commandment is to hold the belief *and* to experience its content. I want to call that make-belief, for reasons that will become clear.

When I engage in a game of make-believe as a little kid, what I try to do is this: I try to experience the world *as if* I were a soldier in the trenches, or whatever it was that I was make-believing. It would be a really boring game, surely, to make-believe that we're sitting around doing nothing, but that we're soldiers, and it's simply an off day, and that we're all just sitting around reading books, knowing in the back of our minds that we're soldiers, but not consciously aware of that fact, nor experiencing the world in a distinctively soldier-like way. That would be a pretty hard make-believe to maintain, and a pretty boring one, if you want to make-believe that you're a soldier. What you generally do when you play a game of make-believe is to attempt to experience the world *as being* a certain way; to experience the world as a soldier; aware that you're a soldier. So, my definition of make-believe is this: to make-believe that *p* is to try to experience the world, and your place in it, as if *p* were true.

For example, we all believe that the world is hurtling around the sun at speeds of roughly 100,000 km/h, and yet, we very rarely *experience* the world *as if* this were true. To make-believe that the world is orbiting the sun at that speed is a game you can play even though it happens to be true; to make-believe in its truth is to try to experience yourself as standing on a planet that isn't still, as the earth beneath our feet generally feels to be to us, but on a planet that is moving very quickly.

What Rabbi Hirsh is asking us to do, in the name of the Ten Commandments, isn't merely to believe that God exists, but also, to *make-believe that He exists*; to experience reality, and your place in it, as a world in which God exists. Of course, this happens to be true, and to call the desirable attitude 'make-believe' seems to imply falsehood, or to be in some other way pejorative.<sup>12</sup> That's not what I mean at all. Rather, I'm saying that there are certain situations in which belief is certainly not the right sort of epistemic state to make you religious. You can believe that there's a God and do all sorts of horrendous things. But, if you're experiencing the world right now as a world in which God is your God making certain demands of you and believing certain things about you and your potential; if you're experiencing the world that way right now, it would be much harder for you to sin.

Frum people sin. And, despite the fact that they sin, they do believe that God exists; even when they're sinning. The mere belief isn't enough to make them religious; not in the holistic sense of religiosity outlined above. Mere belief isn't enough to make a person holy. But, I suggest that making-believe that God exists, to wit, trying to experience the world as a world in which God is your God, *is* an ingredient for real religiosity; an ingredient for inculcating the right posture and attitude towards the world. So, my first thesis is that even where belief is an essential ingredient for

<sup>12</sup> Some have suggested to me calling it 'active-belief' instead. But, that would imply that you *always* have to *believe* the content. But, as we shall see when we discuss the third of my theses, this isn't always the case, even though it often is. 'Seeing-as' has also been suggested to me, by Brent Kyle. Just as in the famous optical illusion you can see one picture either 'as' an old woman, or, 'as' a young woman, perhaps my attitude of make-believe is just inviting you to see the world 'as' being a certain way. But, 'make-believe' still seems a more appropriate description. It's not just seeing the world in a certain way, but it's also about experiencing your place in that world in a certain way.

the religious life, such as the belief that God exists, it is not a sufficiently absorbing epistemic state. Whenever belief is required so too is make-belief.

### **Thesis 2: belief as an impoverished notion**

My second thesis is that belief is an impoverished notion for the philosopher of religion. When I believe that Paris is the capital of France, there is a proposition—the proposition *that Paris is the capital of France*—and, I am adopting an attitude towards that proposition: the attitude of assent. Furthermore, it is generally accepted that knowledge is just a very privileged form of belief. Knowledge is a belief that is both true and well justified. So, it turns out that knowledge is also a propositional attitude; the attitude of belief plus some other stuff. If you try to list all of the things that you know, most likely you'll come up, first of all, with a long list of propositions: I know that I'm reading this essay; I know that I'm in this room; I know that...; Each member of this list will be of the form, 'I know that *p*' where *p* stands for some proposition or other. This is the standard picture. But, this standard picture is coming under increasing pressure, and people are beginning to think that there are types of knowledge that simply fail to be propositional.<sup>13</sup>

Frank Jackson (1982) famously ran the following thought experiment. Imagine a girl called Mary. Philosophers have arranged it that from Mary's birth, she has never been allowed to see any colours. Her world has been completely black and white. The colour of her own skin, let's imagine, has been obscured from her line of vision; her room, and all of the objects to which she has ever been exposed, have always been black and white. But, to be nice to her, they gave her a lot to read. In fact, they gave her all of the neuroscience books that have ever been written, and all of the neuroscience books that *will* ever be written (all in black and white, of course).

Unlike us, Mary has a complete neuroscience, and, let's imagine, she's remarkably clever. She understands all that she reads. Therefore, she knows everything there is to know about the human brain and its workings. She knows, therefore, exactly what happens when a human sees the colour red. She could describe it precisely, in terms of the light rays traveling off the surface of an object at a certain speed, stimulating the retina in a certain way which, in turn, sparks off a chain of events in the optic nerves and in the brain itself. She would describe all that there is to describe in terms of what happens to a human being in those circumstances, both neurologically and psychologically.

Then, she escapes from her prison, and she sees, for the first time, some red. Does she now know something new? And, if she does, what is this new thing that she comes to know? The new thing she has come to know is the *what-its-likeness* of seeing red; but that's not an item of knowledge that can be put into a sentence. We can't take a sentence of the form 'Mary knows that *p*' and plug in a new *p* to correspond to her new piece of knowledge, for the new thing that she knows isn't sentential in its form; it can't be plugged into a that-clause. This all implies that her new found knowledge isn't propositional. You might beg to differ. You might argue that we can say something like this: 'Mary now knows *that* red looks like this.' But, in this supposed counter-example

<sup>13</sup> For an example of philosophers who still think that all knowledge is propositional, see Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson (2001).

to our claim, the word ‘this’ is doing a lot of philosophical work; somehow pointing to the non-propositional content that can’t be put into a sentence. Rather, Mary has been introduced to some non-propositional knowledge. She does know something new, but that something can’t be reduced to a proposition. She now knows the *what-it’s-likeness* of red, which she never knew before.<sup>14</sup>

Eleonore Stump (2010, especially Chaps. 2, 3, and 4) introduces us to another type of non-propositional knowledge; a species of non-propositional knowledge that isn’t concerned with the *what-its-likeness* of phenomenal experiences. She motivates her claim by comparing neuro-typical people and people with autism. Commonly a person on the autistic spectrum will find it hard to read your face and to infer what your emotional state is. Some people on the autistic spectrum will walk around with pictorial cue cards to remind them that smiley faces indicate happiness, and that red, fuming faces, indicate anger, etc. etc. They’ll see a smiling face, and wonder what emotion that indicates; they’ll turn to their collection of cue cards, match the face with a picture, and then finally infer that the person in question is, say, happy. A neuro-typical person, on the other hand, doesn’t feel that they have to work much out, in order to see that another person is happy, or angry.

Contemporary neuroscience seems to indicate that the processes involved in a neuro-typical person and in an autistic person, when registering the emotions of another, are mediated by quite different neurological mechanisms. When you see somebody doing an action that is generally governed by region  $x$  of your brain, then, even though you’re not currently doing the action yourself, but merely watching somebody else do it, the mirror neurons in region  $x$  will fire. Thus, when a neuro-typical person sees somebody smiling, mirror neurons in the parts of their brain that are generally responsible for making them smile, will fire. Though we don’t understand the mechanisms really well,<sup>15</sup> what does seem to be clear is this: a neuro-typical person seems to have something that you might want to call direct access to another person’s happiness. But, the autistic person, who we now know suffers from decreased mirror neuron activity,<sup>16</sup> has to work out *that* you are happy. They don’t have any direct access. We could put it this way: the neuro-typical person simply sees your happiness; the autistic person, lacking in mirror neuron function, doesn’t see your happiness. At best, he works out *that* you’re happy. The autistic person has propositional knowledge of your happiness. The neuro-typical person’s knowledge of your happiness, on the other hand, isn’t mediated by any proposition.

If all of the things that you knew were propositions, you would be an impoverished person. You would first of all be like Mary in her prison. You wouldn’t know the *what-it’s-likeness* of any human experience. And, you’d be autistic. You wouldn’t know what

<sup>14</sup> This thought experiment wasn’t explicitly designed to bring about this conclusion in the realm of epistemology. Jackson’s real aim was to raise a question mark over the theory of physical reductionism in the philosophy of Mind, though the thought experiment is often deployed by others for the purposes that I have used it for here. For a current survey of the philosophical discussion over this thought experiment, cf. Peter Ludlow (2004).

<sup>15</sup> Stump (2010, pp. 69–71) points out a number of relatively crude philosophical errors made by scientists who are trying to describe these findings.

<sup>16</sup> Ramachandran and Oberman (2006).

it is to experience another person directly. Therefore, a religious epistemology that could be reduced to a set of propositions for us to believe in would constitute an autistic form of religion. What makes a person really religious is a *personal* relationship with God. There are no propositions that mediate that: it's about knowing God, not knowing some proposition of the form 'God is  $\Phi$ '; it's about knowing holiness. These are not propositional types of knowledge.

There is a Midrash<sup>17</sup> that discusses the power of King Solomon's parables and metaphors (in the book of *Proverbs* and in *The Song of Songs*). The Midrash says:

Before Solomon arose, nobody understood the Torah. After Solomon arose, everybody began to understand the Torah.

But this translation does no justice to the actual content of the Midrash, because it actually uses two distinct verbs for 'understanding'. The first verb is *lahaskil*. "Before Solomon arose, nobody was able *lahaskil* the Torah." The second verb is *lisbor*. "After Solomon arose, it began to be that everybody *sovrin* the Torah." These are two very different sorts of understanding. *Lahaskil*, I would argue, is the normal propositional form of understanding. But the word *lisbor* is much more interesting. Let's look at some words that share the same root:

- *sever*, which refers to a person's facial countenance – the sort of thing that a neuro-typical person can understand directly, but poses real obstacles before an autistic person<sup>18</sup>
- *sabar*, somebody who is a great story teller<sup>19</sup>
- *sever*, which can mean hope<sup>20</sup> - hope is an attitude towards a proposition, but one that doesn't answer to the normal standards of evidence and warrant. Optimism can be warranted only if you have good reason to believe that there's a 51% chance, or more, of things turning out well. But hope, on the other hand, is sometimes justified come what may, or more accurately, it doesn't answer, in any straightforward manner, to justification or warrant at all; we often hope against all odds.<sup>21</sup>

And thus, the word, *lisbor*, as a form of understanding, conjures up the image of somebody who understands people; somebody who understands faces; somebody who tells good stories; somebody whose attitudes don't answer to regular epistemic norms. Most of these things are not propositional. You'd have to have a very crude philosophy of art if you think that a story can be reduced to a list of propositions. And, even though *hope* is a propositional attitude, it certainly isn't one that conforms to the norms of classical epistemology. Solomon's greatness, according to this Midrash, was that he opened the door to the non-propositional content of the Torah.

<sup>17</sup> Shir Hashirm Raba (1:8).

<sup>18</sup> This word is used with this meaning in Mishna Avot 1:15.

<sup>19</sup> This word is used with this meaning in Tractate Sofrim 16:7.

<sup>20</sup> This word is used with this meaning in Bereshit Rabba 91:1.

<sup>21</sup> I first heard of this distinction between hope and optimism from Lord Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi Emeritus of the UK.

So, my first thesis is that even when belief is necessary for the religious life, it is incomplete without make-belief. My second thesis is that belief is an impoverished notion because it only stands you related to propositions, and yet some of the most important items of religious knowledge are not propositional. They are things that you know directly; not mediated by any proposition, or, indeed any belief.

### Thesis 3: the corrective effects of make-believe

Finally, I want to argue that there are certain instances in which belief isn't important at all, but where make-believe is still essential.

In the *Laws of Repentance* of Maimonides (3:4), we are told the following:

A person needs to view himself, throughout the entire year, as if he were equally balanced between merit and sin and the world were equally balanced between merit and sin. If he performs one sin, he tips his balance and that of the entire world to the side of guilt and brings destruction upon himself. [But,] if he fulfils one commandment, he tips his balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit and brings deliverance and salvation to himself and others. As it is said (Proverbs 10:25): A righteous man is the foundation of the world. [I.e.,] he, who acted righteously, tipped the balance of the entire world to merit, and saved it.

And thus, we have to view the world as if things are very evenly balanced cosmologically, and that if you put even one step wrong, the whole thing will come tumbling down. On the other hand, if you do something marginally good, for instance, putting a tiny amount of money into a charity box, you save the world. Some of the classical commentaries on these laws here seem perplexed as to how Maimonides could say these things, when they're not true. We all sin. And, the world doesn't end.<sup>22</sup> But Maimonides knows it's not true. He wasn't stating these things as a matter of fact. You're not supposed to believe it. But, you are supposed to *make-believe it*.

Sometimes make-believing things that aren't true can have corrective effects. Imagine that you have a speech to make in front of a massive audience. You're wracked with nervousness. A friend suggests that you pretend everyone in the audience is wearing a silly hat. If his suggestion works, how does it work? I suggest that it would work as follows: when the time comes, you know that they're not wearing silly hats, but, the very attempt to visualize the hats may insert just enough irreverence into the proceedings so as to overcome your nerves. Your friend is appealing to what I have here called the *corrective effects of make-believe*.

V. S. Ramachandran is a renowned neuroscientist and physician. He is the first physician to have cured the pain of amputees' phantom limbs. Phantom hands are often clenched so tightly that the phantom fingers and finger nails inflict unbearable pain upon the phantom palm. Many of these patients can't escape the pain because their phantom fists are paralysed in this eye-watering clench. Ramachandran discovered a surprisingly low-tech solution. He got his patients to put their remaining hands into a box, mimicking the position that they felt their phantom hands to be in. Inside the box

<sup>22</sup> See, especially, the classical Hebrew commentaries on the *Laws of Repentance* 3:2.

was a mirror. When the patient looked down, he didn't merely see his actual hand; he saw its reflection as well. This looked just like seeing his actual hand and his phantom. By slowly opening his only real hand, he could make it look as if he was opening both of his 'hands'. And, sure enough, this deceived the brain into thinking that the phantom hand had opened. This relieved the pain.

These patients aren't mad. They know that they only have one real hand. They knew that the box contained a mirror—they must have worked that out! But the illusion (even though they knew that it was an illusion) was what the brain needed to behave appropriately in the real world. This is just like the make-believe about the silly hats; it might help to give rise to behaviour that's more appropriate to the real world than your behaviour would have been without the make-believe. Sometimes our actions are so ill-suited to the actual world that only an illusion, coupled with the *sustained suspension of disbelief*, or a game of make-believe, can generate behaviour that's appropriate.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, some corrective make-believes only seem to have their corrective effects if you know that they're not true. If your make-believe was too vivid; if, for instance, you really saw that room full of silly hats, you might feel a little bit out of place. More importantly, if you vividly saw yourself as having the sole responsibility of the entire universe hanging upon your shoulders, you might be paralysed by the weight of that responsibility. These make-believes are only corrective when you try to experience the world through them, but when you don't succeed in creating too vivid of a make-believe experience. It isn't the case for all make-believes that their corrective effects are dulled by actual belief, but the make-believe that Maimonides here invites us to engage in does seem to be just such a case.

A second example: 'We were slaves in Egypt,' Jewish parents tell themselves and their children each Seder Night, reading from the *Haggada*,<sup>24</sup> 'and the Lord our God took us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.' And then they read, 'If the Holy One, blessed be He, had not taken us out of Egypt, then we, our children, and our children's children would have remained slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.' But that's not true. Do contemporary Jews really believe that however many thousands of years after the fact, they would still have been slaves to Pharaoh? There is no Pharaoh, there's not even a Mubarak, anymore.<sup>25</sup> So, do they really believe that they'd still be slaves to Pharaoh? Do they really believe that had they stayed enslaved, the only political institutions in the history of man to have lasted for that many millennia would have been the Pharaonic ones, which would still be going strong? This all seems highly unlikely. But, then, later on in the *Haggada*, we read that 'In every generation, a person is obliged to regard himself as if he had come out of Egypt.' *As if*. The task isn't to believe; the task is to make-believe.

What happens to you when you try to view the world as if *you* were freed from Egypt? This is part of the key to becoming a religious person: not walking around with a set of beliefs, but walking around with a set of attitudes towards the world; ways

<sup>23</sup> For more on Ramachandran's work on phantom limbs, see [Ramachandran and Blakeslee \(1999\)](#).

<sup>24</sup> The book that contains the text and the liturgy for the Seder Night, the first night of Passover.

<sup>25</sup> This sentence was first written while Mohamed Morsi was still in power, and he didn't last long!



of experiencing the world. If you walk around constantly thinking of yourself and experiencing yourself as personally liberated by God, and you see all other people in the world suffering forms of modern day slavery as comrades who you can empathise with because you were once where they were; if that's the posture you have towards the world, then you'll be well on your way to being holy; religious in the holistic sense of the word.

So, my three theses are these: (1) even when belief is important to being a religious person, it's never sufficient, because you also need to make-believe the things that you believe; (2) belief is an impoverished notion; the most important things that we know are not mediated via propositions, or beliefs—you have a relationship with God; that isn't mediated via beliefs or propositions, to think otherwise would be to adopt an autistic form of faith; and (3) there are lots of situations in which belief isn't important and yet make-belief is still important; where the make-believe can have corrective effects irrespective of the truth or falsehood of the proposition in question.

My intention in belittling the role of belief isn't to adopt the fashionable desire to replace Orthodox Judaism with orthopraxy.<sup>26</sup> On the contrary, I insist that Orthodox Judaism has a large and demanding epistemological component. But, I claim that that epistemology places very little emphasis on classical propositional belief and is generally much more interested in attitudes, postures, make-belief, and non-propositional knowledge. Orthodox Judaism, indeed religion, so conceived is at once more demanding—because it asks for much more than mere belief and practice—and more human—in that it embraces attitudes and emotions that more autistic conceptions of religion ignore. Philosophers of religion are often attracted by the task of defending and arguing for the truth of some set of propositions; the set that they take to constitute the content of the religion that they seek to defend. Paying greater attention to the epistemology of religiosity, we realise that any set of propositions, however true, coherent, and well demonstrated, is bound to be an impoverished shadow of the objects of true religious epistemology.

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<sup>26</sup> A move perhaps most famously associated with Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1995).

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