THE MEANING OF RITUAL PERFORMANCE IN JUDAISM: TWO BASIC STRUCTURES

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I

Rbbinic Judaism devotes a considerable proportion of its literature, from the period of the Mishnah (end of 2nd century c.e.) to modern times, to issues of a ritual nature. This ritual emphasis is reflected in the life-style of the traditional Jew which, whilst only marginally concerned with doctrinal matters, is centrally concerned with the many ritual patterns of Judaism. These constitute the symbolic reality which envelops him: sacred time expressed through his daily rituals, his week culminating in the Sabbath, the lunar months which make up his ritual year with their festivals commemorating agricultural/historical themes. They also determine the co-ordinates of Jewish identity and its distinctive values associated with diet, family life, social relations, study, worship, birth and death.

In Jewish literature the vast corpus of ritual material, known generally as *halakhah,* is concerned with reflection on, and interpretation of, biblical references to ritual. The various rabbinic traditions about the biblical commandments, or *mitzvot,* are developed through the process of legal exegesis and hermeneutics. Halakhic literature is guided by its own norms and standards in this regard, and halakhic discussion seems at first glance to have only minimal contact with issues of a wider religious nature.

In this paper we shall try to show how such wider religious issues do in fact interpenetrate attitudes to, and the formulation of, ritual in Judaism. We shall do this by examining meta-halakhic views about the meaning of ritual, and the way in which the practical *halakhah* is an expression of different understandings of this meaning. We shall also try to show that the models of ritual performance recur throughout Jewish literature, though our main concern will be with their emergence in the formative period of rabbinic Judaism.

II

In a midrashic tale found in a number of different collections[1] we are told:

> "A certain gentile[2] asked R. Yochanan ben Zakkai: These rituals which you perform seem like magic rites. You bring a heiffer and burn it, grind it up, and take its ashes. If one of you is ritually impure through contact with a corpse two or three drops are sprinkled on him, and you say to him 'you are ritually pure'.

He (i.e. Yochanan) said to him: Has an evil spirit ever possessed you?
He replied: No.
Have you ever seen a man possessed by an evil spirit?
He replied: Yes.
He asked: What do you do to him?
He replied: We bring herbal roots, smoke them under him, and sprinkle water on him[3] and she (i.e. the spirit) flees.
He said to him: Let your ears hear what you utter from your mouth. The same is the case with this spirit, the spirit of ritual impurity. As Scripture says: 'And also the prophets and the spirit of impurity I will remove from the land.' (Zechariah 13:2) Water of purification is sprinkled on him and he flees.
After he (i.e. the gentile) had left his pupils said to him: Our master, you have pushed him aside with a straw, what do you have to say to us?
He said to them: By your lives, the corpse does not defile, nor does water purify. But the Holy One, blessed be He, has said: 'I have enacted a statute, I have decreed a decree, you are not allowed to transgress my decree'."[4]

The attitude expressed here by R. Yochanan is of interest because it extends beyond the red heiffer, on which he was questioned, to the whole subject of ritual purity and impurity which was central to Judaism even after the destruction of the Second Temple. Whilst it is true that the midrashic evidence about this attitude appears only in texts of the late amoraic period, being unattested in tannaitic literature, it makes little difference for our purposes whether R. Yochanan actually expressed such a view or it was ascribed to him later on. The fact that all the versions of this tale show little variation or internal development seems to indicate it had assumed a fixed form in the early post-talmudic period. This may point to its early origin, but the opposite could equally well be argued.[5] Be that as it may R. Yochanan was thought of as a leading figure in the re-evaluation of Jewish ritual which took place amongst the sages of Yavneh in the immediate post-Temple period (i.e. after 70 c.e.).

The import of R. Yochanan's attitude to the highly ritualized areas of purity and impurity is that in themselves these categories have no meaning for man. They are forms for human response to God's inscrutable demands. This comes out clearly in the sage's rejection of his *ad hominem* reply to the gentile, which on the face of it seems a reasonable enough explanation of the matter given the power/spirit associations of impurity. It is true, no doubt, that the comparison with someone possessed by an evil spirit[6] may be inexact, since the ritually impure act

in a perfectly normal manner, but the underlying similarities are apparent. The fact is, however, that such an explanation and any other type of explanation is declared invalid by R. Yochanan.

Whether man can ever know the reasons for the red heiffer ritual is itself the subject of different teachings found in the midrash. These may reflect divergent attitudes to the kind of view expressed by R. Yochanan. The latter's view seems to be supported by a teaching, ascribed to R. Joshua ben Levi, that when Moses questioned God about the purificatory nature of the ashes of the red heiffer, God replied:

> "It is a statute and I have decreed a decree, and no being can stand on (i.e. understand) my decrees."[7]

It is even reported of Solomon, described as the wisest of men, that he investigated the matter of the red heiffer and found it beyond his wisdom to comprehend.[8] A contrasting tradition, and one that would involve modification of R. Yochanan's radical stance, is also reported:

> "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: 'To you I reveal the reason for the heiffer, but to others it is a statute'."[9]

III

The implications of R. Yochanan's dictum are further brought out in a teaching which reverses the emphasis of the former, but makes a substantially similar claim about the *mitzvot* as means of man's response to God. This teaching is found in a number of different forms in a variety of midrashic collections:

> "Rav said: The *mitzvot* were only given in order to refine creatures thereby. For what difference does it make to the Holy One, blessed be He, if someone slaughters (an animal) from the neck or if one slaughters from the nape. Hence the *mitzvot* were only given in order to refine creatures thereby."

Another version of this teaching has:

> "What difference does it make to the Holy One, blessed be He, if Israel eats (meat) without ritual slaughter . . . Know that they were only commanded concerning this ritual slaughter in order to refine Israel. For in future times He will make a banquet for the righteous from the gigantic cattle (*Behemot*) and from the Leviathan, and there is no ritual slaughter there . . ."[10]

This version continues by proving that neither the *Behemot* nor the Leviathan are amenable to human slaughter. Rav's teaching therefore would seem to deny heavenly meaning to the *mitzvot,* but also to

restrict their earthly meaning to the discipline necessary in a pre-messianic world. As another midrash puts it:

> "Each animal which is impure in this world the Holy One, blessed be He, will render pure in the future times . . . Why then does he forbid it (in this world)? To see who would accept His word and who would not accept it."[11]

Since the teaching about the refining function of the *mitzvot* in one of the versions[12] actually uses as an example the case of pure, and impure, animals the last quoted midrash aligns itself with the various traditions associated with Rav's teaching. We are then provided with an interpretative gloss on "to refine creatures thereby", i.e. to test their acceptance or non-acceptance of God's word. Such a gloss makes Rav's view of the *mitzvot* very similar to the more particularized statement of R. Yochanan about ritual purity.

Before leaving Rav's dictum, and its variations, we should make one further reference to it, this time ascribed to R. Akiva (2nd century c.e.) rather than to Rav (2/3 centuries c.e.). R. Akiva is questioned, in the midrashic account, about the rite of circumcision and asked why, if God desires man to be circumcised, He does not cause the child to issue ready circumcised from the womb. To this R. Akiva replies that "the Holy One, blessed be He, only gave the *mitzvot* to Israel in order to refine them thereby"[13] i.e. circumcision is necessary so that the Jew can respond to God's command and subject himself to the divine discipline. The formula "what difference does it make to the Holy One, blessed be He, if . . ." which occurs in Rav's teaching is absent from that ascribed to R. Akiva. If the former is genuinely earlier the addition of this phrase may represent a development of the teaching bringing out its point in more striking fashion.

IV

So far we have been considering material which, though ascribed to tannaitic or amoraic sages, does not appear in tannaitic works or in the Palestinian or Babylonian Talmuds. This may be because the material is post-talmudic though ascribed to earlier authorities, or was simply excluded with a mass of other midrashic material. We shall now consider some material from earlier works expressing similar attitudes to those outlined above. This should dispel any suspicions that the redacters of tannaitic works or the Talmuds censored out such material since it was not in accord with normative rabbinic attitudes to the *mitzvot.*

In one of the tannaitic midrashim we find the following teaching, which also appears in an abbreviated form in the Babylonian Talmud:

> " 'And you shall keep my statutes' (Leviticus 18:4). These are the things that the inclination to evil (in man) objects to and the gentiles object to: the prohibition on eating pork, that on wearing garments of mixed wool and linen, the *chalitzah* ceremony of the sister-in-law, the purification of the leper, and the sending away of the he-goat . . . Therefore Scripture says: 'I am the Lord', (idem). I have enacted them as statutes and you have no right to object to them."[14]

Although it is not clear from this midrash what the objections are, the talmudic *baraita* adds the phrase: "Lest you say these are empty (or meaningless) deeds. Therefore Scripture says: 'I am the Lord'."[15] The list of *mitzvot* referred to in the midrash and the printed Talmud text is extended in other versions to include laws associated with: the spittle of cattle, the hair of the Nazirite, the bird offering of the leper, the prohibition on inbreeding animal species, the ox that has to be stoned, the first born ass, the heiffer whose neck has to be broken, and the prohibition on milk and meat.[16] All the items mentioned are highly ritualized aspects of Jewish practice, but it is of interest to note that the red heiffer does not appear in any of these lists. It is mentioned in a later midrashic version of the things that the inclination to evil objects to, together with the prohibition on marrying a brother's ex-wife, that on garments of mixed wool and linen, and the he-goat that is to be sent away.[17] The point of this last-mentioned midrash is that each of these four ritual elements has self-contradictory features. The red heiffer is also mentioned in editions of the *Ein Yaakov* quotation from the talmudic *baraita* referred to above.

The central idea of this teaching that "you have no right to object to them" (midrash) or "to think critically of them" (*baraita*) may not make the point as strongly as the tale about R. Yochanan, but it does nevertheless emphasize the role of the *mitzvot* as means of responding to God's decree. This is the sole meaning for man of the listed rituals, even though on the face of it they seem meaningless (or magical?) activities whose intrinsic content is problematic.

A similar theme of the *mitzvot* serving primarily as forms for obedience to God is found in another teaching from the same tannaitic midrash:

> "R. Eleazar ben Azariah says: How do we know that a man should not say: 'I do not desire to wear a mixture of wool and linen, I do not desire to eat pig's meat, I do not desire to have forbidden sexual relations'. But rather: 'I do so desire them, but what can I do since my Father in Heaven has imposed these decrees on me.' Therefore Scripture says: 'And I will separate you from the nations

> to be unto me'. (Leviticus 20:26). (Thus your separation from them should be for My sake.)[18] Indicating that one should remove himself from sin and accept upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven."[19]

These negative commandments are not to be performed because in themselves the prohibited items are despicable and therefore undesired. On the contrary the reason for refraining from them must be that though desired they are forbidden by God, and the Jew through keeping them accepts upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom. A similar implication is contained in the teaching found in the Babylonian Talmud, and various midrashim, that for everything which God forbade He allowed something of equivalent nature. Thus for forbidden foods He allowed similar-tasting permitted foods, for forbidden sexual relations He allowed equivalent permitted relations.[20] The idea here would seem to be that what is forbidden is done so not because of some intrinsic quality, but so that the Jew can respond to God's commands through ritual performance.

Likewise we may interpret the following teaching, quoted on a number of occasions in the Babylonian Talmud ascribed to R. Chanina (3rd century c.e.) in a similar manner:

> "Greater is someone who, having been commanded to act, does so than someone who has not been commanded and does so."[21]

Though the Talmud invariably quotes this dictum in the context of the greater reward accruing to the former than to the latter, it clearly implies that someone fulfilling a commandment is in a different category from someone merely performing an action, however similar, who has not been commanded. As one of the Medieval commentators explains the difference the former "continually tries to nullify his inclination (to evil) and to keep the commandment of his Creator"[22] which is not the case with the latter. This teaching seems to be based on the idea we have already met with that the *mitzvot* have the purpose of refining man in subjection to God's will, and do not possess intrinsic value of their own.

One last example out of the many talmudic expressions of this type of attitude, and a striking one at that:

> "R. Nachman bar Isaac said: A transgression for the sake of Heaven is greater than a *mitzvah* not performed for the sake of Heaven."[23]

The Talmud in discussing this teaching questions its wording, since there is a tradition that a *mitzvah* not performed for the sake of Heaven (literally 'for its own sake') will eventually lead man to perform a

mitzvah for the right reasons. The Talmud concludes by interpreting R. Nachman to mean that a transgression for the sake of Heaven is equal to, rather than greater than, a *mitzvah* not done for the sake of Heaven.

Behind R. Nachman's dictum, either in its original form or as modified by the Talmud, lies the assumption that it is the intention behind the act and not the content of the act which gives it religious value. A transgression for the sake of Heaven is an acceptance of the Kingdom, whilst a *mitzvah* performed for self-seeking motives is not. This is brought out by the Talmud's objection to R. Nachman's original formulation, for we do not find an insistence that the intrinsic value of a *mitzvah* must make it superior to a transgression for however exalted motives. Instead the objection turns on the practical value of performing a *mitzvah* for the wrong reasons since this leads to correctly motivated performance.

V

The teachings which we have considered so far, which see the *mitzvot* as essentially a response to the inscrutable will of God, and as a refining discipline for man testing his acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom, are ones which span the whole of rabbinic literature. Nevertheless they represent only one general tendency, and other, contrasting, teachings are also found scattered throughout Talmud and midrash. In the latter we do not, of course, find a denial of the theocentric focus of the ritual, but we do find intrinsic meaning ascribed to the *mitzvot* — a meaning which involves the efficacy of the *mitzvot* on a human level (therapeutic) or on a divine/extra-terrestrial level (cosmic).

A *baraita* quoted in the Talmud, and developed by post-talmudic halakhists into a tool for the formulation of *halakhah,* puts the therapeutic viewpoint clearly:

> "The School of R. Ishmael taught: Transgression stops up the heart of man, as Scripture says: 'You shall not defile yourself with them, that you become defiled thereby' (Leviticus 11:43). Do not read 'that you become defiled' (*ve-nitmetem*) but 'that you become stopped up' (*une-tamotem* or *une-tamtem*)."[24]

A transgression has the effect of dulling man's heart or stopping it up, an expression having the meaning of blunting his understanding, and cannot therefore be seen simply as a test of man's obedience to God. By avoiding transgression man avoids its obstructing consequences. In a similar vein a midrashic teaching explains, by means of a parable, the reason why God allowed the gentiles to transgress all the *mitzvot* which He imposed on Israel.

A doctor went to visit two sick patients. He realized that while one had a chance of recovery the other was incurably ill and would die. To the latter he allowed an unrestricted diet, whilst to the former he prescribed a strict one. When questioned about his actions he replied that the one who had a chance of recovery needed to take cre of himself, whereas the incurable patient had no chance of living and therefore could eat anything he wished. In a similar way God allowed the gentiles to eat forbidden things and to commit transgressions since they were destined to perdition, Israel, however, who are destined to eternal life are commanded by God not to allow themselves to deteriorate by eating abominable things, must therefore restrict their diet, and become holy.[25] This brings out the therapeutic value of the *mitzvot* and the detrimental effect of transgressions on the soul of man.

A more cosmic dimension of the efficaciousness of the *mitzvot* is found in a teaching ascribed to R. Simeon ben Lakish (3rd century c.e.):

> "The Holy One, blessed be He, made a condition with the works of creation: If Israel accepts the Torah you will continue to exist. But if not I will return you to primordial chaos (*tohu va-vohu*)."[26]

The acceptance by Israel of the Torah is understood to mean their acceptance of the *mitzvot,* as is apparent from the talmudic context of this teaching. In other words the performance of the *mitzvot* is the guarantee of the ordered workings of nature, a perspective very different from Rav's anti-cosmic "what difference does it make to the Holy One . . . if . . . but the mitzvot were only given to refine creatures thereby". R. Simeon's view is close to a number of teachings about the role of the Torah in the process of creation, e.g. that is was the blueprint used by God for the creation of the universe.[27] We even find the same kind of claim made for particular *mitzvot*:

> "Great is circumcision, for without circumcision the heavens and the earth would not continue to exist."[28]

VI

We have now explored two basic structures in rabbinical meta-*halakhah* representing the attitudes of different sages to the meaning of ritual. The first is theocentric, it de-emphasizes any intrinsic meaning for the ritual and plays up the role of the *mitzvot* in refining man, subjecting him to God's decrees, and testing his acceptance of the Kingdom of Heaven. The second is therapeutic/cosmic in that it assigns an intrinsic efficaciousness to the *mitzvot* on the human or extra-terrestrial levels. Neither view can be dismissed as the opinion of isolated individuals unsupported by the schools of sages or the redactors of rabbinic literature.

Any attempt to decide, from internal evidence, which view predominates in the texts and is representative of rabbinic thought would be singularly problematic. Both views are found distributed throughout the literature, and both are used as standards to support argumentation, indicating that both are basic structures of the rabbinic world-view. Since no direct practical consequences flow from either view they are classified as *aggadah,* rather than *halakhah,* and consequently no decision was taken by rabbinic writers as to their normative status.

We shall try to show, however, that the theocentric view, which rejects intrinsic meaning for the *mitzvot,* is the one more characteristic of rabbinic *halakhah* in its practical application. For in the formulation of *halakhah* out of the discussions of different viewpoints there is implicit a certain attitude to the role and nature of ritual. The detailed laws surrounding a *mitzvah,* and the rejection of other rites and practices not taken up by the *halakhah,* are not theologically neutral but convey assumptions about the relationship between the Jew and God.

Let us consider the rite of circumcision, known in Hebrew as *berit milah* "the covenant of circumcision", which is one of the rituals interpreted explicitly in terms of both structures: the theocentric perspective sees it as an act devolving on man so that he can refine himself thereby, whilst the therapeutic/cosmic one sees it either as a real rectification of something lacking in man or as having consequences for the function of the cosmos.

The Pentateuch says concerning circumcision:

> "And the uncircumcised male who does not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, this soul shall be cut off from its people. He has broken My covenant."[29]

and in connection with the Pascal lamb:

> "No son of a stranger shall eat it. Every slave of a man, who has been acquired by money, you shall circumcise him then he may eat it ... If an alien dwells with you and he would keep the Passover to the Lord, let every male among him be circumcised. Then he may draw near to keep it and he will be like a native-born. No uncircumcised shall eat it."[30]

On the face of it these two passages seem to indicate that circumcision effects a change in those that undergo the rite, and is therefore a precondition of membership of the People of Israel, an initiation into the Community of the Covenant. The eating of the Pascal lamb itself signified the difference between the Israelites and their Egyptian neighbours, and therefore represents a distinctly covenantal meal.

Rabbinic *halakhah* does not interpret the rite entirely in this manner. Commenting on the biblical expression "being cut off" (*karet*) which is used of those who neglect circumcision as of other transgressions, the Talmud remarks:

"If someone dies at fifty, this is a death of *karet*."[31]

Although other views are found about the exact nature of the *karet* punishment, they all interpret it as a punishment for the individual without having any consequences for his membership in the community.

With regard to the Jewish male child, who is to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth, the *halakhah* views the rite as a duty devolving on the child's father, failing that on the religious court or *Bet Din,* and failing that on the child himself when he attains adulthood. Should the uncircumcised adult fail to have himself circumcised he is still regarded as a Jew, with all the rights and responsibilities of his fellow co-religionists. He has transgressed a positive *mitzvah,* but is no different from any other Jew who sins. Thus the ritual slaughter performed by an uncircumcised Jew is acceptable, but not that of a gentile.[32] The *halakhah* also recognizes the case of someone who remains uncircumcised for medical reasons, for instance if two of his brothers have died after undergoing the operation. Such a person is considered fully a Jew, and no sin attaches to his delaying of the rite.[33]

The non-initiatory character of the rite is further brought out in the liturgy accompanying circumcision of the Jewish child. The Talmud cites a *baraita,* also found in the Tosefta, which prescribes the greetings to be uttered by those assembled at the ceremony: "Just as he enters the Covenant, so may he enter into Torah, the wedding canopy, and deeds of lovingkindness".[34] This clearly puts circumcision on a par with other major facets of Jewish life which have no implication of a second birth or initiation.

This picture is complicated, however, by certain other features associated with circumcision where both the *halakhah* and religious custom, *minhag,* have preserved or re-introduced a therapeutic dimension with implications of initiation. Thus a male gentile convert to Judaism, who is considered born anew after his conversion,[35] must undergo both ritual immersion, *tevilah,* and circumcision or if already circumcised must have a drop of blood removed from the penis in symbolic circumcision, for his conversion to be acceptable. Although a view is found in the Talmud[36] that *tevilah* alone without circumcision is sufficient, it is not adopted by the *halakhah.*[37] From this it emerges that circumcision is a necessary part of the initiation of gentiles into the community of Israel.

It is of interest to note that the liturgy for the circumcision ceremony of a proselyte or gentile slave, prescribed in the above-mentioned *baraita,* includes the phrase: "if not for the blood of the Covenant the heaven and the earth could not continue to exist". This phrase is absent from the liturgy for the Jewish child. The rite of circumcision in rabbinic *halakhah* seems, therefore, to have split into two directions represented by the therapeutic/cosmic and theocentric interpretations of ritual. For the proselyte the rite is seen as efficacious in effecting a change of status, without which his nature as gentile is not transformed into his new being as Jew. The cosmic dimension is also preserved, as we have seen, by the liturgical phrase. For the Jewish child, by contrast, the rite is bereft of any intrinsic meaning, it effects no change in status, but is a *mitzvah* signifying man's response to the divine. Indeed in so far as it represents the Jew's entrance into the Covenant with God, it signifies this response pre-eminently. If, as the biblical data seems to indicate, the rite of circumcision was originally closely tied up with initiation in all its aspects, and therefore was seen as introducing a change in those undergoing it, the rabbinic *halakhah* may be viewed as having set out to down-grade any intrinsic quality attaching to the ritual, at least as far as the Jewish child is concerned.

This latter point can be seen if we look at the subsequent history of the rite when a therapeutic dimension was re-introduced for the Jewish child by *minhag,* which to a certain extent has an existence parallel to, but independent of, *halakhah.* There is a custom, which goes back at least to the Medieval period, of not naming the child till after circumcision has taken place. Indeed popular superstition forbids the parents to reveal the chosen name prior to the ceremony. This name, the Hebrew name of the child, is clearly associated in Judaism with the personality of the named person. If a Jew is seriously ill his/her name may be changed or added to in the belief that the evil decree, directed against the sick person, will not apply anymore once he becomes another person, as it were.[38] It is also believed that through this Hebrew name the Jew will be remembered at the Resurrection. Many Jews recite a verse from Scripture during their prayers — a verse which begins and ends with the first and last letters of their name — to ensure such remembrance.[39] It is also customary to circumcise a child, who has died before the rite could be performed, at the graveside and to give it a Hebrew name so that "they will have mercy on him from Heaven, and he will live at the Resurrection of the Dead".[40] The significance of not calling the name till after circumcision, therefore, is that circumcision transforms the child into a Jew.

The therapeutic/cosmic dimension preserved in *minhag* is even more explicit in kabbalistic interpretations of the rite. The whole approach of the Kabbalah to the *mitzvot* is based on an understanding of the latter as possessing an efficacy on both human and divine levels, ritual acts are acts charged with a mystical power and have far-reaching consequences.[41] This is in marked contrast to the mysticism of the talmudic period, the so called Merkavah mysticism, which has as its goal man's mystical self-transcendence towards a vision of the divine throne, and does not concern itself with a mystical interpretation of the ritual.

Concerning circumcision the 17th century kabbalist R. Abraham Azulai comments:

> "Know that a man is not called by the name of man except through ritual circumcision. Without it he is called an evil spirit (*shed*) and not a man . . . As long as the evil forces have a hold on the foreskin and impurity of man, it is impossible for the higher soul to alight on him. Therefore he cannot be called an Israelite. For this reason we have the custom not to call his name except after the circumcision, since then the foreskin and impurity have been removed . . . then he may be called an Israelite man . . . Thus it has been explained that he is called an Israelite through the *mitzvah* of circumcision."[42]

Azulai bases himself on earlier kabbalistic ideas, such as the statement of the Zohar:

> "When an Israelite male is circumcised he enters the Covenant which God made with Abraham . . . since he has obeyed the command of the Torah he enters into this (level of) man and cleaves to the body of the King. Then he is called man."[43]

This type of approach, though in agreement with some of the *minhagim,* is completely at variance with the *halakhah* concerning a Jewish child.

VII

The theocentric focus of ritual, which helped shape the *halakhah* emerging from rabbinic literature but was partially overlaid by the therapeutic/cosmic perspective of *minhag* and Medieval Kabbalah, is still primary amongst the philosophically-minded theologians of the Middle Ages. Their views came in for sharp criticism from pietists and kabbalists who insisted that the *mitzvot* were effective on the soul of man, his environment, and the divine inter-space between man and the unknowable reaches of the Godhead. A good example of philosophical theocentrism, interpreting the *mitzvot* as means for perfecting man and bringing him close to God, is found in the works of Moses Maimonides (1136-1204), the leading theologian and halakhist of his day.

Maimonides takes the view that the *mitzvot* in general are theocentric, although their practical details may be there merely to give body to their application — detail being necessary but ultimately arbitrary. He rejects the view that the *mitzvot* are simply divine dictates without purpose, an extreme expression of theocentrism. According to Maimonides if we do not know the reason for some of the more highly ritualized *mitzvot* that is because our understanding is deficient.[44] The *mitzvot* then do have purpose but not the kind assigned to them by therapeutic/cosmic interpretations.

Maimonides analyses the function of the *mitzvot* into three categories: they provide for social stability, moral development, and the inculcation of correct religious ideas which lead man to a knowledge of God. Whilst the more overtly ethical rituals have the first two functions, the highly ritualized *mitzvot* usually have the latter function. Maimonides quotes the teaching that "the *mitzvot* were only given to refine creatures thereby", and interprets it as saying that they have no other purpose than testing man's obedience. It is only the details of the *mitzvot,* however, which are pure tests of obedience according to Maimonides. Each *mitzvah* in general has a socio-ethical or intellectual (i.e. doctrinally purifying) function.[45]

Maimonides' theocentrism leads him to oppose any astrological or semi-magical interpretations of ritual — astrology and magic being cosmic/therapeutic perspectives reduced to their lowest terms.[46] Concerning the *mitzvah* of *mezuzah,* the parchment scroll containing two Pentateuchal passages affixed to the doorpost, which some Jews regarded as a protective talisman and added magical names to, Maimonides writes:

> "These fools, it is not sufficient for them that they have nullified the *mitzvah,* but they have made a great *mitzvah* which is the unification of the Holy One, blessed be He, the love and service of Him, as if it were a talisman for personal benefit. For they think in their foolish hearts that this is something providing benefit in the vanities of the world."[47]

and he says elsewhere in a more general context:

> "But the truth is undoubtedly . . . that every one of the 613 *mitzvot* serves to inculcate some truth, to remove some erroneous opinion, to establish proper relations in society, to diminish evil, to train in good manners, or to warn against bad habits."[48]

Maimonides follows this programme through in his own attempts to give reasons for the commandments. Thus he explains the rite of circumcision as a means of lessening man's sexual passion, and of serving as a sign of membership in the community of those who affirm the unity of

God and enter into Abraham's Covenant with Him.[49] He rejects the suggestion that circumcision is somehow meant to remove a defect in man's nature, a typical therapeutic perspective. His own version of theocentrism, however, is expressed most clearly in his views on sacrifice and on ritual purity and impurity.

Maimonides sees the laws of ritual purity as having the essential purpose of restricting man's contact with the Temple, since the ritually impure were barred from entering it. These laws therefore generate reverence and awe for the Temple rituals and lead a man to a sense of humility. He adds, characteristically, that ritual impurity was also practiced by idolatrous people in ancient times in a much more extensive way. The commandments about it to the Israelites were thus building on established practice of the times, but giving it a new ethico-religious direction.[50]

The sacrificial ritual itself is seen by Maimonides as a concession to the forms of worship and rites known to the Israelites from their contact with idolatrous cults. In order to wean the Israelites away from the idolatrous focus of such cults they were commanded to bring sacrifices, but only to God, and only in ways which would eradicate the idolatrous tenets of these cults.

> "The usual practice which was current in the whole world in those days, and the general mode of worship in which we (i.e. the Israelites) were brought up, was the sacrificial offering of different animals in those temples in which idols were placed, bowing down to them, and placing incense before them . . . Therefore His exalted wisdom . . . did not demand that He command us to forsake these different forms of worship, abandon them, and nullify them. For this would have been something impossible to accept, given the nature of man to be secure in what he is used to.
>
> It would have been then as if a prophet were to come today and call people to the service of God saying: 'Behold God has commanded you not to pray, not to fast, and not to cry out before Him in time of trouble, but your worship should be in thought without any action at all'.
>
> Therefore the Exalted One allowed these forms of service, but transferred them from being directed to created beings, or imaginary beings which have no reality, to being directed to His exalted name."[51]

These ideas of Maimonides are already found in embryonic form in a midrash:

> "R. Phineas said in the name of R. Levi . . . because Israel was greatly attached to idolatry in Egypt, and they used to bring their sacrifices to the satyrs . . . The Holy One, blessed be He, said: Let them bring their sacrifices before me at all times at the Tent of Meeting. They will thus be separated from idolatry and saved."[52]

Nevertheless they were bitterly criticised for seeming to relegate the whole sacrificial cult, the sphere of the holy, to the mundane level of an educational policy. Indeed one of Maimonides' later critics, the 18th century kabbalist and scholar R. Jacob Emden, was even led to deny that Maimonides was the real author of the work in which these ideas appear because his explanation of the *mitzvot,* among other things, was absurd.[53]

One of Maimonides' supporters, the 13th century Bible commentator R. David Kimchi, quotes the former's view on sacrifice approvingly in his exegesis of the verse:

> "For neither did I speak unto your fathers nor did I command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices, on the day that I brought them out of Egypt."[54]

There Kimchi remarks that the essential point of the sacrificial ritual was not the sacrifices themselves, but the harkening to God's voice that this entailed, directly people away from idolatry to God and bringing about the removal of false belief.

VIII

The two structures in the interpretation of ritual which we found in rabbinic literature remained basic to Jewish thought throughout the Middle Ages, and were instrumental in shaping ritual law itself. Many of the schisms and movements within Judaism from the time of the separation of Gentile Christianity from Judaism, through the Karaite schism, the turbulence surrounding Shabbatean messianism, the Chasidic movement, down to the emergence of Reform Judaism may be analysed in terms of the attitudes taken towards ritual. The structures we have outlined seem to recur in them time and again, with extreme positions leading to schism and sectarianism. They are a fundamental component of Jewish theology and the tension between them has been the source of creativity opening up far wider issues for exploration. Since they are embedded in the ritual itself they have had an effect on intellectual and layman alike, and their influence is arguably greater than theological views of a more obviously doctrinal nature.

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Notes

1. Mostly reported anonymously, but in one manuscript version ascribed to R. Zeira (circa 300 c.e.) in the name of R. Eleazar ben Pedat (3rd century c.e.) c.f. E. Urbach *The Sages,* Jerusalem 1975 p. 849 n. 31.
2. In the printed Tanchuma edition the questioner is a proselyte. Presumably this is a scribal error reading *ger* for *goi.*
3. Some versions have "on her", i.e. on the evil spirit which is grammatically feminine.
4. *Numbers Rabbah* 19:8.
5. cf. J. Neusner's analysis in his *Development of a Legend: Studies on the Traditions Concerning Yohanan ben Zakkai,* Leiden 1970 pp. 168-80 and 255-6. Neusner concludes that the story is a late invention.
6. In this case a spirit known as *tezazit,* possibly meaning "disturbed" or "deranged".
7. *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 8:1:5.
8. ibid 7:23:4.
9. *Tanchuma* (Buber) Chukat 24. In some versions this is ascribed to R. Yose ben Chanina, but see Urbach ibid p. 381 and 851 n. 43, and Buber's editorial note 240.
10. *Genesis Rabbah* 44:1 and *Tanchuma* Shemini 7.
11. *Shocher Rov* Psalm 146.
12. *Tanchuma* (Buber) Shemini 12.
13. ibid Tazriya 7. A contrasting attitude is found in a midrashic tale where R. Oshayah replies to a similar question with the answer that circumcision is necessary as an actual rectification of man. cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 11:2.
14. *Sifra* Acharei 13.
15. TB *Yoma* 67b. The Hebrew expression *maaseh tohu* could perhaps be translated as "mumbo jumbo", if we take *maaseh* as a magical act. The latter is used in such a way in *Sanhedrin* 7:11.
16. *Dikdukei Sofrim* and R. Chananel to TB *Yoma* 67b.
17. *Tanchuma* (Buber) Chukat 23.
18. This phrase is found in Rashi's quotation of the text in his commentary on Leviticus 20:26. We have included it because it brings out a point crucial to R. Eleazar's argument from the verse.
19. *Sifra* Kedoshim 9.
20. TB *Chullin* 109b. Yalta, who mentions this teaching in a question to her husband R. Nachman, is obviously quoting a well-known tradition. This is also apparent from the midrashic parallels which quote the teaching in the name of various sages or anonymously.
21. TB *Kiddushin* 31a.
22. *Tosefot* to TB *Avodah Zarah* 3a.
23. TB *Nazir* 23b. The expression translated here as "for the sake of Heaven" literally means "for its own sake". The translation is demanded by the context.

24. TB *Yoma* 39a. This is most probably the source of the belief amongst Medieval halakhists that certain foods "stop up the heart and give birth to an evil nature". cf. *Shulchan Arukh* Yoreh Deah 81:7.
25. *Tanchuma* (Buber) Shemini 10.
26. TB *Shabbat* 88a cf. TB *Pesachim* 88b "Without Torah the heavens and the earth could not continue to exist'..
27. *Genesis Rabbah* 1:1.
28. TB *Nedarim* 32a.
29. Genesis 17:14.
30. Exodus 12:43-4, 48.
31. TB *Moed Katan* 28a, and cf. Rashi to Genesis 17:14.
32. Tosefta *Chullin* 1, TB *Chullin* 4b, *Shulchan Arukh* Yoreh Deah 2:7.
33. TB *Chullin* 4b, *Shulchan Arukh* ibid and 263.2.
34. TB *Shabbat* 137b.
35. TB *Yevamot* 48b.
36. ibid 46a.
37. cf. Maimonides *Yad* Isurei Biah 13:6.
38. A.I. Sperling *Taamei Ha-Minhagim,* (Eshkol) Jerusalem n.d., p. 105.
39. ibid p. 147.
40. *Shulchan Arukh* Yoreh Deah 263:5.
41. cf. G. Scholem "Tradition and New Creation in the Ritual of the Kabbalists" ch. 4 of *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism,* N.Y. 1965.
42. *Chesed Le-Avraham,* Lemberg 1863, Jerusalem reprint 1968, 2:52.
43. *Zohar* 2:86a.
44. *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:26.
45. ibid 3:26-7.
46. ibid 1:62, 3:37.
47. *Yad* Mezuzah 5:4.
48. *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:31.
49. ibid 3:49.
50. ibid 3:47.
51. ibid 3:32, and cf. ibid 3:36.
52. *Leviticus Rabbah* 22:8.
53. *Mitpachat Seforim,* Lemberg 1870 p. 56.
54. Jeremiah 7:22.