# What is a Religious Jew? Exploring the Ritual Self

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## I. The Relationship Between Ritual and Sincerity

2. Maimonides/Rambam, Guide for the Perplexed/*Moreh Nevukhim* Book III, Chapter 32


7. Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 13a-b

8. Babylonian Talmud Rosh HaShanah 28a-b

9. Rashba (R. Shlomo ben Aderet), Commentary to BT Berakhot 13b

## II. The Ambiguity of Ritual


We develop four central points in the following chapters. First, we claim that ritual creates a subjunctive, an “as if” or “could be,” universe. It is this very creative act that makes our shared social world possible. Creating a shared subjunctive, we will argue, recognizes the inherent ambiguity built into social life and its relationships – including our relations with the natural world. The formality, reiteration, and constraint of ritual are, we argue, all necessary aspects of this shared creation. Second, we claim that these aspects of a shared “as if” created through ritual pervade many realms of human endeavor. Ritual is not restricted to the realm we moderns define as “religious,” or even to “secular ritual.” Ritual and ritualistic behavior are not so much events as ways of negotiating our very existence in the world. To be sure, we can find such ritual behaviors in churches, mosques, synagogues, and so on. But we can also find them in public performances, at concerts, in the theater, and, crucially, in more quotidian enactments of civility and politeness among strangers and even intimates. Whenever the expressions “please” and “thank you” are used, when we ask a casual acquaintance, “How are you?” both knowing in advance that we do not really expect an honest answer (which could be disastrous), we are enacting a crucial ritual for the maintenance of our shared social world. Our third substantive point...is that ritual modes of behavior can be usefully contrasted to what we term sincere forms of approaching the world. Sincere views are focused not on the creation of an “as if” or a shared subjunctive universe of human being in the world. Instead, they project an “as is” vision of what often becomes a totalistic, unambiguous vision of reality “as it really is.” The tropes of sincerity are pervasively with us, in both our personal and our shared social world. They appear in the arrogances of what are termed fundamentalist religious beliefs. They are present in our overwhelming concern with “authenticity,” with individual choice, with the believe that if we can only get at the core, the fount, the unalterable and inimitable heart of what we “really” feel, or “really” think, then all will be well – if not with the world, then at least with ourselves...The tensions between ritual and sincerity is not new, but pervasive in human cultures.
1. The Relationship Between Ritual and Sincerity

2. Maimonides/Rambam, Guide for the Perplexed/Moreh Nevukhim, Book III, Chapter 32


...every one of the six hundred and thirteen precepts 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. All this depends on three things: opinions: morals, and social conduct. We do not count words, because precepts, whether positive or negative, if they relate to speech, belong to those precepts which regulate our social conduct, or to those which spread truth, or to those which teach morals. Thus these three principles suffice for assigning a reason for every one of the Divine commandments.

3. Philo, On the Migration of Abraham, 89-93


(89) For there are some men, who, looking upon written laws as symbols of things appreciable by the intellect, have studied some things with superfluous accuracy, and have treated others with neglectful indifference; whom I should blame for their levity; for they ought to attend to both classes of things, applying themselves both to an accurate investigation of invisible things, and also to an irreproachable observance of those laws which are notorious. (90) But now men living solitarily by themselves as if they were in a desert, or else as if they were mere souls unconnected with the body, and as if they had no knowledge of any city, or village, or house, or in short of any company of men whatever, overlook what appears to the many to be true, and seek for plain naked truth by itself, whom the sacred scripture teaches not to neglect a good reputation, and not to break through any established customs which divine men of greater wisdom than any in our time have enacted or established. (91) For although the seventh day is a lesson to teach us the power which exists in the uncreated God, and also that the creature is entitled to rest from his labours, it does not follow that on that account we may abrogate the laws which are established respecting it, so as to light a fire, or till land, or carry burdens, or bring accusations, or conduct suits at law, or demand a restoration of a deposit, or exact the repayment of a debt, or do any other of the things which are usually permitted at times which are not days of festival. (92) Nor does it follow, because the feast is the symbol of the joy of the soul and of its gratitude towards God, that we are to repudiate the assemblies ordained at the periodical seasons of the year; nor because the rite of circumcision is an emblem of the excision of pleasures and of all the passions, and...
of the destruction of that impious opinion, according to which the mind has imagined itself to be by itself competent to produce offspring, does it follow that we are to annul the law which has been enacted about circumcision. Since we shall neglect the laws about the due observance of the ceremonies in the temple, and numbers of others too, if we exclude all figurative interpretation and attend only to those things which are expressly ordained in plain words. (93) But it is right to think that this class of things resembles the body, and the other class the soul; therefore, just as we take care of the body because it is the abode of the soul, so also must we take care of the laws that are enacted in plain terms: for while they are regarded, those other things also will be more clearly understood, of which these laws are the symbols, and in the same way one will escape blame and accusation from men in general.

4. Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer Ba’al Shem Tov, Keter Shem Tov, I, section 192

As for the matter of devekut: some hold that [the sign that you have] achieved devekut is when you utter a single word during prayer and linger over it for a long time, because you are unable to separate yourself from it as a result of your devekut. Others say that devekut is achieved when you perform a mitzvah or study Torah in a way that turns your body into a “seat” for your nefesh, and the nefesh into one for the ruah, and the ruah into one for the neshamah, and the neshamah becomes a seat to the light of the Shekhinah [hovering] above your heard; and you feel as if this light were spreading all around you, with you sitting in its center, trembling with joy, and the heavens a dome above you.


A tense, dialectical relationship between religion in essence and religion in manifestation is at the core of the religious consciousness...The tension flows from the painful awareness that manifestations and essence sometimes drift apart, form the sober recognition that a carefully constructed, firmly chiseled normative system cannot regularly reflect, refract, to energize interior, fluid spiritual forces and motives...If halakha is a means for the actualization and celebration of ethical norms, historical experiences, and theological postulates, then external conformity must be nurtured by internal sensibility and spirituality.

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Charles Taylor begins his Sources of the Self with the following assertion: “Selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes.” Tying theories of modern selfhood to morality, not only how we should act but, as important, the sources we draw from in determining how we should act and how they are interpreted, stand at the center of my inquiry in regards to what I will call modern musar, better known as the Musar Movement initiated by Israel Salanter (1810-1883) in nineteenth century Eastern and Central Europe. I will argue that musar offers an innovative theory of self deeply embedded in traditional society (and thus halakha) yet introduces, articulates, and or perhaps anticipates, a notion of autonomy that plants the seeds of a kind of secularism that later emerges in the neo-musar movement in contemporary America…I use “secular” in a very narrow sense to refer to ways of constructing the self as an autonomous agent which can determine proper behavior, originally tied to but not identical with traditional authority structures, particularly the act of Torah study and the obligatory nature of halakha. Secular here needn’t deny God by definition, but it does incorporate competing, sometimes even alternative forms of agency in regards to human flourishing.

7. Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 13a-b

משנה: המורה mean קורא בתורה והגיע זמן המקרא אם כוון לבו יצא... בבראשית

Mishnah: If one was reading the section of the Torah containing the shema, if one had intention, one fulfills the commandment to recite the shema...

נאמור mean קורא ב {}; קורא mean קורא בתורה והגיע זמן המקרא אם כוון לבו יצא... בבראשית

...
Gemara: From the ruling of the Mishnah we extrapolate that commandments require intention. What does “if one had intention” mean? Intention to read. Intention to read? But the person is already reading? This is in the case of someone who was reading to repair the Torah scroll...The rabbis taught: “and they shall be” means that you may not recite shema in reverse order, “the[se] words on your heart” – perhaps the entire section requires intention; therefore the verse specifies “these [words on your heart],” to stipulate that only up to this phrase requires intention, but beyond this intention is not required. This is according to Rabbi Eliezer. Rabbi Akiva said to him: But the verses also stipulate “that which I command you today shall be on your heart,” suggesting that the entire section requires intention! Rabbah son of bar Hannah said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: the law follows Rabbi Akiva. Some learn this in context of the following baraita: One who recites shema must have intention. Rabbi Aha says in the name of Rabbi Judah, It is sufficient to have intention during the first paragraph. Rabbah son of bar Hannah says in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: the law follows Rabbi Aha who spoke in the name of Rabbi Judah. Yet another baraita: “and they shall be,” means that one should not recite the shema in reverse order. “Upon your heart” – Rabbi Zutra says: the mitzvah of intention is only up to this phrase; beyond this phrase is only the mitzvah of recitation. Rabbi Yoshyaya says the reverse – the mitzvah of recitation is up to this phrase; beyond this phrase is the mitzvah of intention...

8. Babylonian Talmud Rosh HaShanah 28a-b

They sent to Samuel’s father: A person who was forced to eat matzah has fulfilled his obligation. Who forced them? If you suggest that a demon forced them, do we not learn in a baraita that one who is sometimes ranting and other times lucid cannot fulfill their obligation when they are ranting? Rav Ashi said: The Pharsim forced them to eat. Rava extrapolated that this must mean that one who blows a shofar for musical purposes also thereby fulfills the obligation to hear the shofar. But isn’t that obvious? They are both ritual. One might have thought that because the Torah simply says to eat matzah just eating it is enough, whereas the Torah describes blowing shofar as a remembrance blast, a person just fiddling around on a shofar could not fulfill their obligation. But now we see...
that they can! Clearly, Rava believes that fulfilling commandments does not require intention! But what about another early source: “If one was reading the section of the Torah which includes the shema, if one has intention to recite the shema, then one fulfills the commandment of reciting the shema, and if one does not have such intention, one does not fulfill. Does this not refer to intention to fulfill a mitzvah – and only if you have such intention can you actually fulfill the mitzvah. If so, how can Rava suggest that fulfillment of mitzvot requires no intention! No, the source refers to having intention to read. Intention to read? The person is already reading! No, the person was reading as a scribe to make corrections to the Torah scroll. Come and here the answer based on another instance: If one was walking behind the synagogue or lived near the synagogue and heard the sound of the shofar or of the Megillah (scroll of Esther), if one had intention, one fulfilled their obligation, and if one did not have intention, one did not fulfill one’s obligation. Does this not refer to obligation to fulfill a commandment? No, it refers to requiring intention to listen. Intention to listen? But one heard the sounds automatically? One might have thought it was merely the sound of a braying donkey...

9. Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet (Rashb”a), Commentary to BT Berakhot 13b

Perhaps there are two types of intention – one that is simply intention to fulfill a commandment, and another that is intention to comprehend and be attentive to the particular meaning of the ritual at hand. While shofar may require (or not require) the former, recitation of the shema or the silent amidah requires the latter....
II. The Ambiguity of Ritual


With some consistency, ambiguity has...been systematically identified as an important aspect of ritual. Lewis, for example, argues that ritual may emphasize the ambiguity or incoherence of symbols in order to invite speculation or a perception of “a mystery that seems to come within grasp.”...David Jordan and Fernandez independently explored the ways in which ritual symbols are inherently ambiguous, thereby affording the diverse and non-falsifiable interpretations they find necessary to the maintenance of community.


We can accumulate great quantities of discourse, but never dispel the suspicion - even within our own minds - that it is all just artifice...The Calvinist’s “Am I really saved?” and the teenager's “Am I really in love?” are at heart similar kinds of questions. After three decades of marriage, kids, laundry, mortgages, funerals, fights, and in-laws, the relationship tends to be sustained by a shared “as if” rather than a continued “as is.” Relationships that fail to construct a shared subjunctive over the long term tend to fall apart. It is not enough to love each other sincerely if people fail to act as if they love each other; and acting as if they love each other includes ritualized forms of expressing concern, verbally and in concrete deeds of helpfulness. Anti-ritualist attitudes deny the value to this subjunctive of play, convention, and illusion. They seek to root interaction in some attestation to the sincerity of the interlocutors. Yet, if our love for each other is registered only in what we say, then we are caught in the perennial chasm between the words (of love) and the love itself. The words are but signifiers, arbitrary and by necessity at one remove from the event they signify. Hence the attempt to express love in words is endless, as it can never finally prove its own sincerity. Ritual, by contrast, is repeated and unchanging, a form of practical wisdom (what the Greeks called phronesis) rather than symbolization. Thus, for example, we can in the end distinguish two forms of the words “I love you.” The emotionally wrought confession by the star-struck young man appeals to the sincere mode. Of course, like all the language of sincerity, we have doubts - perhaps he is just trying to get her into bed. Or perhaps he is indeed sincere and, having established this “as is” of his love, will never feel the need to say those words again, even through decades of marriage. He may also fail to say those words ever again because he is not sincerely experiencing the same kind of love as when he first “fell in love” (Kernberg
1974: 486-511). On the other hand, we also have the ritual “I love you,” whose performative aspect is more important than its denotative function. This is why one can repeat it for years and years to the same person. In so doing, one is not adding any bit of hitherto unknown information, but instead acting out a ritual, rather in the manner of a prayer.

In the continual search to renew the “authentic” sources of sincerity, there is little room for ambiguity. All ambivalence and ambiguity threatens the attempt to arrive at the “true” self. That true self can of course be very different in different times and historical periods. But in each case, sincerity tries to resolve all ambiguity to forge a “pure” and “unsullied” consciousness...The particular model of the “true” self may change, but the dynamic of ascertaining its presence is everywhere similar. This is a dynamic that leaves little room for ambiguity, for mixed motives, and for the complexity and contradictory character of most human striving.

... The dual moment of both realizing and accepting the limits of understanding - the ability simply to move on with a life short of the ultimate Truth - brings us immediately to ritual. For ritual is a critical device that allows us to live with ambiguity and the lack of full understanding. The presentation of ritual’s “as if” universe, the subjunctive, requires neither a prior act of understanding nor a clearing away of conceptual ambiguity. Performance simply and elegantly sidetracks the problem of understanding to allow for the existence of order without requiring understanding. As we have seen, in this it is akin to many other forms of concrete action. Our analysis thus far suggests a continuum of orientations to order, or perhaps to the categories of order, that exemplifies the different admixtures of sincerity and ritual that can be found in the social world. Ritual orientations stress the performative, repetitive, subjunctive, anti-discursive and social. Sincere orientations, on the other hand, tend to privilege the indicative, unique, discursive, and private.


At this point many philosophers have blundered. The curse of the “why” question followed them relentlessly. As soon as they had begun to interpret religious phenomena causally, they negated their very object. The chief error of genetics can be clarified by reference to Hume’s psychological genetics. Hume disparaged human knowledge because he detected psychological roots at the base of all elementary structural concepts...Whatever is true must be innate or given a priori; whatever was developed is false. Innate ideas present the design of genuineness and adequacy. Hence, as soon as Hume discovered the psychological origin of our cognitive propositions, his faith in their validity and objectivity was shattered. The categories were declared subjective and
arbitrary – mere beliefs. Advocates of psychologism and positivism still travel the same road. The truth of the matter is that the genetic background of a certain method does not in the least affect its cogency and validity...The criterion of evidence and adequacy is not the transcendent source, but the indispensability of certain concepts and their constitutive experience. The task of the logician and the philosopher is not to survey the cognitive act from a causal, but from a normative and descriptive perspective. The genetic problem is the concern of the anthropologist and explanatory psychologist but not of the philosopher. Now it follows that, is sociological and psychological genetics are irrelevant to the philosophy of science, there is no reason for the philosopher of religion to limit his/her interpretation to causal designs. Unfortunately, while neither the mathematician nor physicist are troubled by the history of their disciplines, the philosopher of religion is still a slave to genetics. In contrast with genetic methodology, a philosophy of religion, following a retrospective procedure – from the objective to the subjective realm – does not eliminate its own object. The method of reconstruction yields more than relationship explanatory exposition. It offers a multidimensional religious outlook to the homoreligious. ...

Although the blowing of the shofar on Rosh ha-Shana is a decree of the Holy Writ, nevertheless there is a hint to it, as if saying, Ye that sleep, bestir yourselves from your sleep, and ye that slumber, emerge from your slumber. Examine your conduct, return in repentance and remember your Creator. (Maimonides, Laws of Repentance/Hilkhot Teshuva 3:4)

...[the alarm] of repentance, which for Maimonides is implied in the sounding of the shofar, cannot serve as the cause of the commandment that would assure it a status of necessity, but it must be apprehended rather as an allusion to a correlated subjective aspect. Kol shofar, the sound of the shofar, only betokens self-examination and conversion. The reconstruction method does not operated with the principle of necessity. It neither claims that the subjective counterpart would only be crystallized in one particular way, nor does it explain how it was finally reflected in its objectified form. It merely points at the stationary trail left behind the religious “logos” and indicates parallel tendencies in both the subjective and objective orders.
It is apparent that contamination and purification constitute a decree of the Holy Writ, and they are not among the things which human reason can understand; they are among the non-rational laws (hukim). Purification by immersion belongs to this class of laws, for contamination is neither of dirt nor of offal which can be washed away with water. Nevertheless a hint is contained in this: Just as one who intends to become purified, once she immerses has become pure, even though nothing new has happened to her body, likewise one who intends to purify her soul from the impurity of the soul, i.e., evil thoughts and bad opinions, once she has committed in her heart to leave these thoughts and has immersed her soul in the waters of correct opinions, she is purified. For behold it says, “And I shall sprinkle upon you pure waters and you shall be purified: from all of your impurities and idols, I shall purify you (Ezekiel 36:25).” (Maimonides, Law of Ritual Immersion/Hilkhot Mikva‘ot, 11:12)

Again we encounter the same approach. The causal method is rejected, for catharsis is not a rational norm within the grasp of finite reason. The method of reconstruction is again employed to analyze the norm and discover the hint leading to the subjective realm...


This divide between presence and absence, between the literal and the metaphorical, between the supernatural and the natural, defines the modern Western world and, by imperial extension, the whole modern world. Imagine one of my Italian Catholic grandmothers going to see a statue of the Virgin Mary in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She climbs the museum’s steep steps rising up from Fifth Avenue and pushes through the crowds and into the rooms of medieval art, where there are many lovely statues of the Blessed Mother, whom my grandmother knows and loves. My grandmother wants to touch the statues. She wants to lean across the velvet ropes to kiss their sculpted robes or to whisper her secrets and needs. But this is not how modern people approach art. For them, the statues are representations, illustrative of a particular moment of Western history and the history of Western art, and are to be admired for their form and their contribution to the development of aesthetic styles over time. There’s nothing in them, no one there. The guards rush over and send my grandmother back out to the street.

This is a parable of two ways of being in the world: one associated with the modern (although this is complicated, clearly, since my grandmothers lived in the modern world after all, and you can find believers in cathedrals throughout the world today petitioning statues); the other with something different from the modern. One is oriented toward presence in things, the other toward absence. As the guard rushing over shows, the difference is carefully policed...Certain ways of being in the modern world, certain ways of imagining it, are tolerable and others are not. Especially intolerable are ways of being and imagining oriented to divine presence.