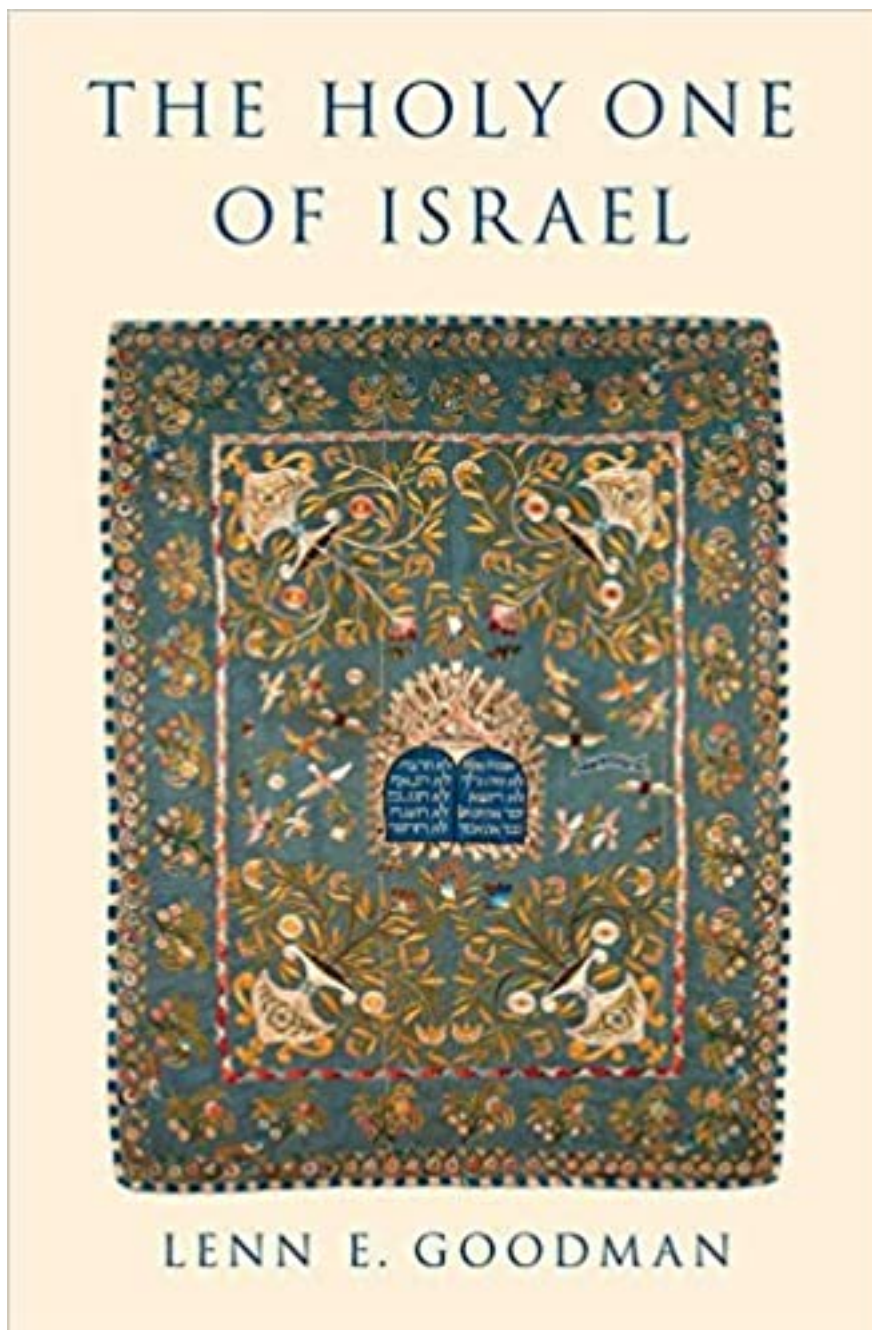


The Holy One Of Israel. A review essay

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Lenn E. Goodman: THE HOLY ONE OF ISRAEL New York: Oxford University Press, 2019



In our era of increasing specific, and thus minute academic and philosophic specialization, Lenn Goodman stands out as a rare polymath, what in rabbinic Hebrew is referred to as *ish eshkolot*,^[1] a person of broad and deep, indeed encyclopedic, knowledge in a variety of disciplines. Goodman's works combine significant scholarly contributions in his studies and translations of medieval Arab/Muslim philosophic texts – Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Tufayl, and the Brethren of Purity – together with works of medieval Jewish philosophers such as Sa`adiah Gaon. Goodman,

together with a colleague, is currently completing a long-anticipated translation and commentary from the Judeo-Arabic original of the *Guide of the Perplexed* by Rambam (Maimonides). However, Goodman is not just a scholar of renown (he is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in Humanities at Vanderbilt University), but an important philosopher in his own right. Although his sources, references, and topics are thoroughly catholic, in his thematic philosophical books he clearly positions himself within the framework of Jewish philosophy.^[2]

Goodman doesn't just translate and explain texts he presents; he engages them in philosophic dialogue. Besides a broad range of contemporary philosophers, he cites and places in dialogue an immense variety of sources. To name just a few: passages from the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), New Testament, Talmudic rabbis, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Al-Ghazzali, Anselm, Rambam (Maimonides), Thomas Aquinas, Pascal, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Hermann Cohen. Across the different centuries and cultures, in Goodman's capable hands, they dialogue with each other and with Goodman himself. Moreover, Goodman's erudition and profound learning are expressed in a masterful and elegant style.

The Holy One of Israel is Goodman's exposition of his theistic *ani ma'amin* (credo), which in many cases takes the form of philosophical exegesis of biblical ideas and passages.^[3] His ideas and interpretations will not necessarily convince others,^[4] but Goodman makes no such claim. As he pointed out in his earlier *God of Abraham*,^[5] where he defends the Ontological Argument for the existence of God against its critics (eg., Kant), Anselm

frames the Ontological Argument . . . not as a proof but as a prayer . . . Anselm assumes God's reality and addresses him, but hopes now to show that God's perfection entails and unites all perfections, existence included.^[6]

To reiterate: Goodman does not claim to "prove" his theistic thesis logically in order to convince others. Does not the multitude of philosophic "proofs" of God's existence in fact prove that none of them succeeded?^[7] Perhaps all we can hope for – and need to be satisfied with – is a rationally coherent and reasonably consistent thesis, and Goodman certainly meets this standard.

However, in my understanding, the challenge in *The Holy One of Israel* – which I see not as a book to be read lightly but to be studied and pondered – is not whether one agrees with Goodman's stance in general or his interpretation of a particular point, but that he makes one think. In exegesis of sacred texts, as in philosophy, the questions a thinker raises are often far more important than the answers offered. Goodman is certainly remarkably fluent in the technicalities of philosophy, but he wants to use them in order to move beyond them to ultimate questions. Contrary to *credo quia absurdum est*, Goodman is clearly committed to a theistic belief which is rational, or at least reasonable and grounded in, and informed by reason. But just as he offers a defense of the Ontological Argument without actually using it, Goodman concisely cuts through the pretentious rationalism which claims to offer irrefutable logical proofs of what we think and believe: "The Principle of Sufficient Reason is metaphysics, not logic."^[8] Nevertheless, for Goodman, human reason is "the anchor point" of "our inner affinity with the divine," and "is the basis of the Torah's saying that man and woman are created in God's image."^[9] "The human mind . . . is where our finitude meets the infinite."^[10]

In this way, Goodman is a modern follower of medieval rationalist Jewish philosophers. Rambam (Moses Maimonides, 1135-1204 C.E.), for whom the term *tzelem* (usually translated as "image" of God) refers not to one's external physical shape (for which he says the Hebrew term is *to'ar*), but refers to "the natural form" in virtue of which something is what it actually is, and that it refers in Genesis 1:26-27 to intellectual apprehension.^[11] Similarly, for Abraham ibn Ezra (c. 1089-1164 C.E.) in the generation before Rambam, "reason is the foundation" (*shiqul ha-da'at hu ha-yesod*) for proper understanding of Scripture, because "the angel between a person and his God is his

intellect” (*ha-mal’akh bein adam u-vein elohav hu sikhlo*).[\[12\]](#)

Goodman acknowledges his indebtedness to Rambam:

Reason, linking us to God, must govern our actions; it is fed by understanding. God’s perfection, Maimonides argues, inspires love and emulation; and this is an intellectual love. For the Torah assigns it to human hearts . . . The quality of our love of God rests on the adequacy of our idea of God . . . Intellectual love, clearly, is not cold or sterile. Like the procreative drive it is at once God’s commandment, a blessing, and a natural imperative.[\[13\]](#)

That intellectual love of God, in turn, necessarily leads “to contributing to God’s creative work. For there are many things God cannot do alone.”[\[14\]](#)

This moral vision anchors the Mosaic ethos, elevating the grammatical other to the status Hermann Cohen stressed, of the *Mitmensch*, the fellow-man . . . Hence the broader command, invoked to ground the more specific: Treat others as you’d wish to be treated – *love thy fellow as thyself* (Lev. 19:18).[\[15\]](#)

The essential ethical component of the love of God, expressed in loving one’s fellow human being, follows from the fact that “God is not a *Mitmensch*. Yet we are commanded to love God.”[\[16\]](#)

Since in *The Holy One of Israel* (as in his other books) Goodman creates a dialogue across the centuries and cultures of his sources and then engages them all in dialogue, I take this opportunity to engage in a bit of dialogue with Goodman about his reference to Hermann Cohen (1842-1918).

In his *Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (*The Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*), ch. 8 “The Discovery of Man as Fellowman (*Die Entdeckung des Menschen also des Mitmenschen*),” Hermann Cohen discusses the ethical challenge of transforming the *Nebenmensch* (the “next person” – think of the stranger standing next to you in a crowded bus or metro) into the *Mitmensch* (the “person with” you).

Thus man arises as plurality, which in itself forms the unity of a group. At the same time, man as such, as one member of this group, also poses in himself the problem of unity. Thus a concept arises that grasps man, not yet indeed as an individual with the full weight of the concept, but as a unit in a series: one man next to other men, just the next man (*Nebenmensch*). And this experience – for this conception of the next man is taken from experience – poses for ethics and also for religion, in accordance with the latter’s share in reason, the problem of the *fellowman* (*Mitmensch*) . . . For the correlation of God and man (*Korrelation von Gott und Mensch*) cannot be actualized if the correlation of man and man is not first included.”[\[17\]](#)

The problem, then, is that without that transformation of the *Nebenmensch* into the *Mitmensch*, “the ‘next man’ (*Nebenmensch*) becomes unavoidably the ‘opposing man’ (*Gegenmensch*).”[\[18\]](#)

In the same chapter, Cohen connects this to the commandment in Leviticus 19:18 to love one’s fellow (*re`a*): “Finally, out of these basic determinations of the law the general commandment of the love of the stranger becomes intelligible,”[\[19\]](#) because “the so-called love for the neighbor (*die sogenannte Nächstenliebe*)” is elucidated some verses later (v. 33-34) by the commandment to love the stranger “as oneself” (*du sollst ihn lieben, er ist wie du*).

Note that the English translation “as oneself” does not accurately represent Cohen’s German translation of Leviticus 19, where the key word is to love one’s fellow (and also then the stranger) *kamokha*. In this passage in *The Religion of Reason* Cohen more carefully translates *kamokha* (literally: “like you”) as *er ist wie du* – “he is like you.” In other words, for Hermann Cohen the commandment is not, in Goodman’s words, to love one’s fellow “as oneself” by “treat(ing) others as you’d wish to be treated,” but to love the other because the other person is “like you” – and must be treated as a subject, because “he is *kamokha*, like you,” similarly endowed with reason.

Cohen had already made this point in his earlier (1908), essay “Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis” (“The Character of Maimonides’ Ethical Theory”) later included in his *Jüdische Schriften* (“Jewish Writings”):[\[20\]](#)

It is an intriguing [Aristotelian] illusion that the solitary thinker in his state of eudaemony, is most likely to attain full selfhood. We [Jews] know, however, that the isolated self exclusively engaged in thinking cannot be an ethical self (*nicht das ethische Selbst sein kann*). For this self, there exists no I without a Thou (*Für dieses gibt es kein Ich ohne Du*). *Re`a* means “the other” (*Re`a heißt der andere*), the one who is like you (*er ist wie Du*). He is the Thou of the I (*er ist das Du zum Ich*).

Although he does not mention it in either book, Cohen’s point that Leviticus 19:18 means to love one’s fellow (*re`a*) because “*er ist wie du* – he is like you” (and not to love the other “as yourself”), created in the divine image, endowed with reason, is clearly based on the *Be`ur* (Commentary) of Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) on Leviticus 19:18, based on linguistic, syntactical, and philosophical considerations.[\[21\]](#) Cohen had studied at the Breslau Jewish Theological Seminary, where he must have been exposed to the *Be`ur*.

Returning to Goodman’s own discussion of the command to love of one’s fellow, it is significant that it is in his chapter on natural law that he cites the connection of that commandment (Leviticus 19:18) with the obligation two verses earlier (Leviticus 19:16) “not to stand idly by the blood of your fellow,” i.e., when the other person is in danger.

Affirmative obligations spring from the demands of personhood and the dignity bespoken by our creation in God’s image. Hence Levinas’ call to see the boundless demands to be read in a human face: “Do not kill me” is just a start, and even that unspoken cry must also mean “Do not slight me, do not make yourself invisible to me!” (cf. Isaiah 58:7).[\[22\]](#)

Again, reflecting his reading of Levinas, Goodman writes on the acceptance of the other as other:[\[23\]](#)

Full recognition of another’s subjecthood opens up to us when we see in another’s personhood no mere echo of our own, but our counterpart, a subject whose projects are no less weighty, for their otherness, than our own.

This, then, is the meaning of the commandment to love the other “as oneself” which ends with “I am the Lord:” we can only know ourselves by knowing the other as subjects. In Goodman’s words:[\[24\]](#)

Self-knowledge springs from recognizing others not as objects of perception or desire, but as conscious, eager beings, worthy, by their subjecthood, of treatment as ends in themselves. It is in this way that awareness of another’s personhood opens a window into

God's presence . . . It is because we can know one another as subjects that we can be commanded to love one another as we love ourselves. Even a stranger can be a second self.

Whether, then, one's ethical values are grounded in religious faith or in natural law,

the issue is not whether one follows God's will or nature's dictate. What matters is how one thinks of God or nature, or human flourishing.[\[25\]](#)

In Goodman's theistic approach, the ethical challenge of intellectual love of God is expressed in and leads "to contributing to God's creative work. For there are many things God cannot do alone," and that ethical imperative applies to science and philosophy, as well:

Science would pursue its ideal of unity more successfully than it has in chasing the reduction of all things to their least parts, by looking instead toward the sanctity of being as nature's largest theme and acknowledging the ingenuity and prodigal generosity manifest in nature . . . Science and philosophy, when not shielding their eyes from an epiphany, may seek to reweave the scattered rays of light they see into the unity and universality they can infer to be their source.[\[26\]](#)

For Goodman, then, faith and reason lead, or should lead, to the same point. Religious ritual properly serves this goal:

Monotheism seeks the common Source toward which all such goods point. When studied, welcomed, and practiced with critical openness, the poetry and rituals of Israel can be originary, not derivative, their tropes as adequate as the instruments forged by philosophy can be . . . only provided that our keenest rituals and symbols are not assumed to mean no more than themselves, or expected to serve as magic surrogates obviating active thought and thoughtful action.[\[27\]](#)

Following his philosophical reading of the story of Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush (Exodus Ch. 3), where God identifies himself as *ehyeh asher ehyeh* (Goodman affirms the common translation of this phrase, "I am that I am"), Goodman comments: "God speaks . . . metaphysically, naming Himself to Moses and all Israel in terms of Being."[\[28\]](#) The ineffable name of God, the Tetragrammaton, the root of which simply means "being," leads Goodman to understand Rambam's third argument (of four) at the beginning of Part II of the *Guide of the Perplexed* as at least partially ontological. The other arguments are cosmological, resting on inferences grounded in our study of nature. The third argument, however, differs. It is based on an analysis of the concept of "necessary being" that Rambam borrowed from Ibn Sina (Avicenna),[\[29\]](#) and "does embed an appeal to the intuitive summit of pure reason, an ontological-type argument encapsulated in the Tetragrammaton."[\[30\]](#) Goodman thus requires us to modify the categorical determination of Harry Wolfson (1887-1974) that

of the many historical proofs for the existence of God – the three from speculative reason enumerated by Kant, the cosmological, the ontological, and the teleological, and others like universal assent and the innateness of the idea of God – only the cosmological type of argument was pressed into service by Jewish theologians . . . As for the ontological argument . . . it is entirely absent, though some of the ingredients of which it is made up were not unknown, as, for instance, the identity of essence and existence in God.[\[31\]](#)

At least part of the difference of opinion between Wolfson and Goodman on the ontological proof relates to the differing notions of necessity. As Goodman pointed out in his *God of Abraham*, whereas for Kant necessity is logical, for Ibn Sina necessity is self-sufficiency. Goodman there concludes, contra Kant: “The idea of confining necessity to logic is simply unsound.”^[32] The difference of opinion may also reflect the fact that Goodman, a scholar of both Rambam and Ibn Sina, defends the ontological proof against critics like Kant, as mentioned above.

There is much more that could be written about such a rich book as *The Holy One of Israel*, but this essay, hopefully, by surveying and dialoguing with a few of its philosophical, exegetical, and scholarly topics, may serve as an appetizer.

One fundamental question remains in conclusion: why should non-Jews as well as Jews be interested in Lenn Goodman’s *Holy One of Israel*?

The answer is simple. We all grow, are educated, think, and philosophize while grounded in a particular linguistic, cultural and religious tradition. However, the fact that a philosophy or theology is *grounded* in a particular tradition does not mean it is *relevant* and *meaningful*, and has significant implications, only within that particular tradition. In this regard, Hermann Cohen was careful not to refer to Judaism as “the religion of reason” but to “The Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism.” Even if one’s religious and philosophic sources reflect the particular culture in which one has been born and educated, if one’s questions (and, hopefully, also one’s answers) are well thought through and developed, they can, and should challenge thinkers from other cultures and traditions who at most will then have to “translate” them – not linguistically, although possibly terminologically – from a different cultural context to their own. That is the ongoing challenge of religious philosophy’s need and ability to become enriched by borrowing from other cultures, at least (although not only) among the three western monotheistic communities with traditions of revealed Scripture.

Harry Wolfson (another great *ish eshkolot* of the previous generation) maintained that Philo of Alexandria, a Jew whose works, written in Greek, were preserved by the Church and were unknown to Jewish and Muslim philosophers in the Middle Ages,^[33] was an archetype for all western religious philosophy whether that philosophy (with the question of the relation of reason and revelation) was dressed in Hebrew, Arabic, or Latin “garb.” That Philonic structure, Wolfson maintained, lasted for some seventeen centuries, among philosophers writing in Hebrew, Arabic and Latin, until Spinoza “freed” philosophy from its subservience to revelation.^[34] Lenn Goodman’s latest book, with its “dialogue” (and not merely mixture) of classical, medieval, modern, and contemporary sources, originally written in Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, Latin and modern European languages is but another example of his proficiency in such inter-cultural enrichment in which we all can, and should learn from and with each other.

About the author please see: [Raphael Jospe](#)