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Judaism's Distinct Perspectives on the Meaning of Life

ABSTRACT

In contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, there has been substantial debate between religious and secular theorists about what would make life meaningful, with a large majority of the religious philosophers having drawn on Christianity. In this article, in contrast, I draw on Judaism, with the aims of articulating characteristically Jewish approaches to life's meaning, which is a kind of intellectual history, and of providing some support for them relative to familiar Christian and Islamic approaches (salient in the *Tanakh*, the New Testament, and the *Qur'an*), which is a more philosophical enterprise. Sometimes I point out that dominant views in contemporary philosophy favor a Jewish approach to meaning relative to rivals, e.g., insofar as Judaism contends that a merely earthly life can be meaningful. Other times I suggest that Judaism

KEYWORDS

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provides reason to doubt dominant views in recent analytic philosophy, e.g., to the extent that the former posits a people, not merely a person, as a bearer of meaning.

INTRODUCING A WAY TO APPROACH JUDAISM AND LIFE'S MEANING

I am interested in how to understand what, if anything, confers meaning on human life from the perspective of Judaism as a religion different from other ones, particularly Christianity and Islam. In particular, I reflect on Judaism's contributions to thought about life's meaning in the light of concepts and positions common in contemporary English-language, and specifically analytic, philosophy. With much of this literature, I understand talk of "life's meaning" and cognate phrases to connote a cluster of properties such as making sense, forming a narrative, realizing oneself, meriting fitting reactions such as esteem or admiration, manifesting values higher than animal pleasures, realizing higher-order purposes, or contributing positively to something beyond oneself. For most philosophers currently writing on life's meaning, when we think or speak about it, we have in mind at least one of these features and quite often more than one as an amalgam (e.g., Markus 2003; Thomson 2003, 8–13; Metz 2013a, 24–35; Mawson 2016; Seachris 2020).

In contemporary analytic philosophy, an extremely large majority of those sympathetic toward a religious approach have drawn on Christian ideas.¹ These thinkers include John Cottingham, William Lane Craig, Stewart Goetz, Timothy Mawson, Thomas Morris, Paul Moser, Philip Quinn, Joshua Seachris, and Richard Swinburne. In this article, in contrast, I draw on Jewish sources,² with the intellectual-historical aim of articulating characteristically Jewish approaches to life's meaning and the more philosophical

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1. For a critical overview of recent work by philosophers of religion in respect of life's meaning, see Metz (2019).

2. Robert Nozick appears to be literally the only contemporary analytic philosopher to address life's meaning by drawing substantially on Jewish sources, specifically from the *Kabbalah* about God's ineffability and unlimitedness (1981: 571–610). I do not discuss his views in this article since these ideas are not as mainstream, but see Metz (2016).

aim of providing some support for them relative to some familiar Christian and also Islamic approaches, with emphasis placed on the *Tanakh* in comparison to the New Testament and the *Qur'an*.

The title of this article speaks of Judaism's "distinct" approaches to life's meaning, but that does not necessarily mean utterly unique. Although Judaism has of course been in existence the longest, the other two Abrahamic faiths that grew out of it have been around for many centuries, during which a wide array of variants have developed. Chances are that for most any putatively unique Jewish perspective, one can find a strain of another religion that shares it. So, my approach is to identify what is *salient* in Judaism, particularly the Hebrew Bible, that pertains to life's meaning, relative to the key texts of Christianity and Islam. Certain ideas are presented as *more* Jewish than Christian or Muslim.

Just as there are varieties of Christianity and Islam, so of course there are of Judaism. Although one could focus on, say, the writings of Martin Buber and their implications for life's meaning, I instead treat the Jewish religion more broadly, even if still in a circumscribed way. To obtain the requisite focus, I principally consider early Jewish ideas from the *Tanakh*, albeit ones that have continued to be taken seriously by later Judaic authorities (especially as captured in the *Mishneh Torah*), modern Jewish theologians, and the broader culture of Judaism. This approach means that I am not trying to present an accurate representation of the entire Jewish tradition on the topic of life's meaning. Instead, I focus largely on classic texts and then with the aim of focusing on ideas that both differ from the other Abrahamic faiths and merit philosophical consideration. The reader will see that I therefore downplay, for one example, the rabbinic tradition.

The reader does not need to know the differences between, say, Hasidic and Reconstructionist Judaism in order to appreciate this article; instead, those outside the fold should find the Jewish nature of the religious perspectives fairly familiar. What is new here is bringing out their implications for philosophical understanding of life's meaning and, furthermore, motivating them as plausible relative to competitors. Note, though, that I do not attempt to provide conclusive justification for what I label "Jewish" perspectives. My aims are the more limited ones of showing in some cases that they merit more consideration than they have received from contemporary analytic philosophers of religion and of life's meaning, and in other cases that the latter philosophers tend to hold views that implicitly support the more Jewish perspectives.

In considering how some ideas expounded well more than 2,000 years ago might bear on twenty-first-century philosophical reflection on life's meaning, it might be that I am imposing "modern" categories on "pre-modern" thought. For instance, some maintain that the question of life's meaning arose only upon the rise of skepticism about the existence of God and objective purposes as well as the influence of mechanistic-scientific explanation (e.g., Landau 1997). However, the book of Ecclesiastes is straightforwardly viewed as raising questions of meaning in life distinct from ones about happiness and without any doubt about the reality of God's will (on which see Metz 2018). In addition, one need not suppose that the authors of Ecclesiastes and other ancient texts were thinking in terms of life's meaning for it to be the case that some of their ideas are revealing when applied to that context.

Accept, then, that the project is to consider attractive approaches to life's meaning in the light of what is salient in the *Tanakh* and has been prominent in Judaism for thousands of years and not as prominent in other Abrahamic religions and particularly their central religious texts. It follows that a number of familiar suggestions are non-starters. It will not do to contend that, for Jews, God is one, the singular ground of the universe who judges all that happens in it, where relating to His unity is a source of meaning in our lives. Monotheism was a pretty good invention relative to polytheism at one point in human history, but, even if one believes that the Christian Trinity doctrine is inconsistent with God's absolute oneness, at least Muslims have accepted the latter for over a millennium in the light of the *Qur'an*.

It also will not suffice to maintain, as is suggested in one widely read article, that the meaning-conferring way to relate to the single God for Jews is by obeying Him. "In the eyes of Judaism, whatever meaning life acquires derives from this encounter: the Divine accepts and confirms the human [where] the Divine acceptance of the human is a commanding acceptance" (Fackenheim 1965). Christians and Muslims also believe that meaning comes from carrying out God's commands.

Furthermore, upon considering the content of God's commands, one finds a lot of common ground among the three Abrahamic faiths. To be sure, Jews tend to believe there are 613 commandments (*mitzvot*), where Christianity and Islam, in contrast, posit a small handful. However, there is substantial overlap in respect of the "big ones," the most influential

commandments that have some patent justification to them, such as to honor God, to love one's neighbor as oneself, to refrain from harmful interference with others, and to be generous to foreigners.³ As Rabbi Hillel is famously taken to have said, "That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is interpretation" (*Talmud*, <https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat.31a>), where this prescription is of course prominent in Christianity (e.g., Luke 6.31; Matthew 7.12) and to a lesser extent Islam (indirectly in the *Qur'an* 41.34, but clearly in the *hadith*, sayings ascribed to Mohammed).

In sum, given the parameters of this article, perspectives on life's meaning must be found in facets of Judaism beyond the ideas that there is one God who commands us to do certain things such as glorify him and treat those made in his image with kindness. One must look elsewhere, or at least it would be revealing to do so. In the following I therefore consider these aspects of the Jewish religion, which I submit are more promising: what happens upon having done God's bidding, and specifically whether one can expect an eternal afterlife; how much one may challenge God in the course of carrying out His will; and what the bearer of life's meaning can be, and specifically how God's will might confer meaning on a people as opposed to a person. In addition to contending that characteristically Jewish answers to these questions are distinct from those of standard forms of Christianity and Islam, I will make the case that the Jewish answers ground *prima facie* attractive approaches (though, again, I do not argue that they are more justified than rivals). Sometimes I point out that dominant views in contemporary analytic philosophy provide reason to favor a Jewish approach to meaning, while other times I suggest that the latter provides reason to change the former. I conclude by briefly noting additional positions on Judaism and life's meaning that *prima facie* merit exploration elsewhere.

3. Some readers might be tempted to focus on the apparently non-rational decrees that are utterly unique to Judaism (the *hukkim*), such as the prohibitions against enjoying the fruit of a tree in the first three years (Leviticus 19.23) and wearing wool and linen fabrics in one garment (Deuteronomy 22.11). Presumably they are indeed no less the will of God and hence serve sensible purposes than, say, the laws governing killing, injury, and the like (the *mishpatim*), as Maimonides maintains in *A Guide for the Perplexed*. However, insofar as a meaningful life is one that makes sense or exhibits something valuable for its own sake, it will be a challenging undertaking to ground life's meaning in the *hukkim*.

OBEDIENCE WITHOUT HEAVEN, OR AT LEAST DISOBEDIENCE WITHOUT HELL

It is well known that it is difficult to find in the *Tanakh* the explicit claim that we all have a soul, understood here as a spiritual substance that will forever outlive the death of our body. A plain reading of the text suggests that those who composed it believed that there is a God who transcends the earth and can influence what happens on it, but not that human beings are immortal and, say, can enjoy eternal life upon having obeyed His commandments.

Indeed, it is not merely that there is an apparent absence of reference to immortality in the *Tanakh*, but that there is, moreover, a clear presence of skepticism about it. Particularly poignant passages may be found in Ecclesiastes. Here are just two:⁴

I decided, as regards men, to dissociate them [from] the divine beings and to face the fact that they are beasts. For in respect of the fate of man and the fate of beast, they have one and the same fate: as the one dies so dies the other, and both have the same lifebreath; man has no superiority over beast, since both amount to nothing. (3.18–3.19)

Even if a man lives many years, let him enjoy himself in all of them, remembering how many the days of darkness are going to be. The only future is nothingness! (11.8)

Job, too, seems rather dismayed at the prospect of his death: “There is hope for a tree; If it is cut down it will renew itself. ... But mortals languish and die; Man expires” (14.7, 14.10; see also 7.6–10, 7.16, 7.21, 9.22–26, 17.13–16).

As for the *Torah* in particular, the very first parts of Genesis include a warning to human beings that if they eat from the tree of knowledge of good and bad they “shall die” (2.17). Having eaten from it, God then executes the threat by preventing them from accessing the tree of life that would have enabled them to “live forever” (3.22) and instead by having them “return to dust” (3.19). In short, the *Torah* begins with an explanation of why human beings are mortal (and also suffer from various kinds of labor, whether reproductive, household, or agricultural).⁵

4. All quotations from the Hebrew Bible are from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

5. Hence, I think it is incorrect to say that “there is no explicit rejection of the widespread belief in an afterlife” to be found in the *Tanakh*, as per Goldshmidt and Segal (2017, 111) in an otherwise useful essay recounting and philosophically evaluating Judaism’s approaches to an afterlife.

There are admittedly some passages elsewhere in the *Tanakh* suggesting the prospect of eternally surviving the death of one's body (for many commentators, most clearly Daniel 12.1–3, but consider also Psalm 73.25–27). In addition, it has become common for Jews, particularly since the time of the Pharisees, to believe that we, or at least the upright, will live forever in Heaven.

Even so, I maintain that the Jewish tradition differs from the Christian and the Muslim traditions in several ways in respect of death. For one, there are indeed passages such as those from Genesis, Ecclesiastes, and Job expressing grave (so to speak) doubt about the ability to survive the death of one's body forever, whereas there are none that stand out in the New Testament or the *Qur'an*. Of course, there is much discussion of unbelievers in the *Qur'an*, but the attitude invariably taken toward those skeptical of an afterlife is that they are failing to see the evidence readily before them (for just one example, see *Qur'an* 6.29–39). Of the purportedly holy texts, only the *Tanakh* suggests bad news, and does so on several occasions.

For another, passages in the *Tanakh* suggesting that one could survive the death of one's body are often unclear about whether that would involve immortality or merely a temporary reprieve.⁶ Even the most explicit passage about immortality (Daniel 12.1–3) says that only “many” will receive eternal life or everlasting abhorrence, strongly suggesting that not everyone has a soul, *contra* common interpretations of the Christian Bible and the *Qur'an*.

For a third, even if the Pharisees won the debates with the Sadducees, so that the prospect of a “world to come” championed during the rabbinic period indeed “came to predominate in Jewish belief” (Ariel 1995, 74), it is still famously rare for Jews to believe that God would sentence one to eternal damnation (for some discussion see Kertzer and Hoffman 1996, 117–18). In contrast, Christians and Muslims have *typically* (of course not invariably) taken Hell to be a live option facing us if we reject God, and this idea is salient in plain readings of both the New Testament (Jude 1.7; Mark 9.43; Matthew 25.46) and the *Qur'an* (2.162, 2.167, 5.37, 43.74–75).

Suppose, then, that much more prominent in Judaism than in the other two Abrahamic faiths is the idea that one does not have a soul, or at least not one that might end up in Hell. What does this mean for the meaning of life?

6. For a few examples, see commentary on Isaiah 53.10–11, Psalm 49, Proverbs 10.2, and Proverbs 12.28 from Berlin and Brettler (2004: 892, 1336–37, 1464, 1468).

If there is no immortality, some will be inclined to react as Koheleth, the presumed author of Ecclesiastes, does when he repeatedly proclaims that “all is vanity” and that life is akin to “the pursuit of wind.” Lower values such as eating, drinking, and being merry are available to a merely earthly life, but not the higher values associated with a meaningful life. Such a reaction parallels what one characteristically encounters in the Christian and Muslim traditions, in fact. They tend to focus squarely, though admittedly not exclusively, on the prospect of eternal life as a source of meaning. The *Qur’an* is explicit with this oft-quoted passage: “What is the life of this world / But play and amusement? / But best is the Home / In the Hereafter, for those / Who are righteous” (6.32; see also 3.14, 6.70, 93.4). In addition, many of the Christian thinkers contributing to contemporary debates in English-speaking philosophy about life’s meaning maintain, say, that an eternal life in Heaven would consist of an “infinite” meaning that would dwarf the finite “dollop” of meaning available to a merely earthly life (Mawson 2016, 13, 144, 154) or that, without immortality, life would be “utterly meaningless” (Craig 2000, 42).

Consider, instead, some other approaches to meaning that are prominent in Judaism and are more distinct from those typical of Christianity and Islam. One is a this-worldly understanding of what can make life meaningful. It is quite common for Jews and especially Jewish thinkers to maintain that much meaning in life can come from following God’s commandments, where living in the right, lawful way (*halakah*) is understood to include things such as studying the *Torah* (see, e.g., Fonrobert 2000 for a clear statement), advancing justice in the here and now, and more generally working to repair a broken, earthly world (*tikkun olam*). Indeed, the language of “meaning” is routinely explicit in the works of Jewish intellectuals expounding what is involved in obeying God’s law. For just two examples, consider, “[B]y the very nature of the law it is not supposed to be felt and, indeed, I believe, has generally not been felt as a burden but as a meaningful way of life” (Fromm 1966, 192) and “Godhood can have no meaning for us apart from human ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty, interwoven in a pattern of holiness. *To believe in God is to reckon with life’s creative forces, tendencies and potentialities as forming an organic unity, and as giving meaning to life*” (Kaplan 1994, 26; italics in original).

These passages suggest that meaning is to be found precisely in the decisions to obey God’s commandments during a finite life. However, another *Tanakh*-inspired variant would be that, upon having carried out God’s will,

one both pleases Him and receives reward from Him in this earthly life, which also confer meaning. For an analogy, consider that it is meaningful to play the piano beautifully, but all the more meaningful to play for an audience that expresses its appreciation with a standing ovation.

The view that a life can be meaningful in virtue of living one way rather than another during a finite period, without the prospect of forever surviving the death of one's body, has, in fact, become the dominant position among twenty-first-century analytic philosophers of life's meaning. If we think of the stereotypical lives of Albert Einstein, Moses, and Gustav Mahler, they seem meaningful merely in virtue of the activities they performed, even if we suppose they lacked spiritual selves who encountered eternal bliss upon the deaths of their bodies (for just a taste, see Taylor 1987; Singer 1996; Baier 1997; Wolf 1997; Martin 2002; Trisel 2004, 384–85; Wielenberg 2005, 31–37, 49–50; Norman 2006; Landau 2017). Even if all we have is about 80 years on this planet, and a lucky 120 years in the case of Moses (Deuteronomy 34.7), we remain inclined to differentiate between lives devoted to, say, “cultivating one's prowess at long-distance spitting or collecting a big ball of string” (Wolf 2010, 104), on the one hand, and those exemplifying certain kinds of enquiry (the true), morality (the good), or creativity (the beautiful), on the other. Meaning is absent in the former cases, and present in the latter ones, even if we ultimately return to dust.

In sum, we need not be immortal in order successfully to realize ends higher than pleasure, to live in ways that merit admiration, or to lead a life-story that is compelling. If true, that is a strong reason for us to favor the conception of meaning characteristically suggested by the written law of the *Tanakh*.⁷

What if we instead do have souls that are all bound for Heaven and none for Hell? This metaphysical view, more characteristic of the oral law of the rabbis and of the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1983, esp. 123–25, 2007), also grounds an approach to meaning in life that differs, and in plausible ways, from mainstream Christianity and Islam. One might have initially been inclined to think that it is incoherent to believe in Heaven

7. To be sure, the same sort of argument could be made in respect of God—even without Him, some lives might intuitively seem capable of meaning. This argument, however, would apply across the board to all monotheisms, whereas this article aims to provide a sympathetic hearing to conceptions of life's meaning in Judaism relative to those in Christianity and Islam.

but not Hell, but it is a sensible combination, at least given some other, reasonable claims. If one's nature were so inherently and foully polluted as to make one unworthy of God's presence, then Hell would make some sense as a possible destination for those who have avoided the easy decision to become cleansed. However, the Jewish tradition of course does not accept the Christian doctrine of original sin, and instead reasonably holds that individual human persons could become quite virtuous (even if not perfect) through their deeds, with time and effort. In addition, if one were capable of performing deeds on earth that merited infinite responses, then Hell could be apt as the retributive response to bad deeds. However, finite deeds seem to deserve only finite responses, when it comes to justice; an infinite amount of torment is grossly disproportionate to even torture and murder that last a finite time.

Supposing, then, that no one can merit Hell, neither by virtue of his inherent nature nor his contingent actions, a just God would not eternally punish anyone (for further philosophical discussion, see, for just one example, Kershner 2005). Of course, by the same reasoning, a just God would not eternally reward anyone either. However, a loving God might well do so.

Putting these ideas together, one suggestion is the view that, if we all had souls, then a just and loving God would punish the wicked for a finite period, during which they would receive the harm they deserve, repent, and permanently reform their characters, after which they would join the upright in an everlasting reconciliation with them and God (cf. *Mishneh Torah*, Repentance [*Teshuvah*]). Another suggestion is the view that God would kill the wicked, with death construed as a finite and fitting penalty for the most serious misdeeds, while bringing the upright to Him forever (an approach that is more consistent with the *Tanakh*, where death for the wicked is often expressed as deserved). Granted, it would be absurd if no one were punished for wickedness, but it does not follow that anyone morally must, or even may, be made to suffer *forever*. These other-worldly conceptions of meaning in life are straightforward companions to another major strain of Judaism.

They also constitute strong, underexplored competitors to the Christian and Islamic otherworldly conceptions of meaning that include eternal damnation. The Hell-free conceptions of meaning through immortality are a small minority in the contemporary literature on life's meaning, but for those inclined to think that immortality is necessary for (great) meaning,

they warrant much more attention than they have received.⁸ On the face of it, these views capture, to no worse a degree than their Hellish rivals, the sorts of intuitions that have motivated the belief that mortality is incompatible with (great) meaning, such as those about being held morally accountable, making a difference to the universe, being an integral part of the fabric of reality, and satisfying the deepest desires of human nature. These intuitions have grounded many analytic-Christian philosophies of life's meaning (e.g., Morris 1992; Craig 2000, 2009a, 2009b; Quinn 2000; Goetz 2012; Cottingham 2016; Seachris 2016; Swinburne 2016), but they *prima facie* support the conceptions of meaning grounded on the more rabbinic Jewish ideas no less.

OBEDIENCE WITHOUT SERVILITY

The previous section discussed the ways that God would respond to those who either do or do not obey Him and their implications for meaning in life. In contrast, this section considers more carefully what might be involved in the process of carrying out His will. How is one to go about it?

All the Abrahamic faiths by and large agree that one should obey God's commandments willingly. One gets little or no meaning in life if God or another person were to force you to do His bidding.⁹ All three also agree that God's threat of punishment for failing to do His bidding is not enough to count as "force" in the relevant sense—which is coherent, for one surely can willingly obey the state's law against murder even if one is threatened with severe penalties for breaking it.

An apparent point of disagreement between the three faiths concerns how to ascertain precisely what God's considered will is and, at times, how to get God Himself to abide by it. A salient theme in the *Tanakh* is a kind of free-thinking on the part of human beings in relation to God as they try to understand His plans and see them carried out.

For example, we have God planning to wipe out the entire city of Sodom for its sinful ways, but Abraham remonstrating with Him not to kill so many innocent people there (Genesis 18.22–32). We have God telling Moses to go free Israel from Egypt, but Moses offering some reasons to God for thinking

8. For some adherents among contemporary Christian philosophers of life's meaning, see Walker (1989) and Mawson (2018), who posit that everyone is destined for Heaven.

9. Though the *Qur'an* not infrequently suggests that God is responsible for the fact that some people hold the beliefs and make the choices they do.

that this is a bad idea, including that he is a poor public speaker (Exodus 3.11–4.17). Upon Moses having freed Israel, we have God being inclined to destroy the Israelites, but Moses defending them from God’s wrath by reminding Him that the covenant forbids such (Exodus 32.9–14). Finally, for now, we have God apparently permitting much evil to befall innocent people, but, instead of accepting that, Job has “prepared a case” against God (13.18). Job remarks, “I insist on arguing with God” (13.3), and, not receiving much of a reply, says that if only he could reach God, “I would set out my case before Him / And fill my mouth with arguments” (23.4; see also 13.15). Job demands a justification from God for the way he, Job, an upright man, has suffered.

Note that these examples are not really ones of rebellion, where rebellion is of course present in all three Abrahamic faiths, whether in the form of a disobedient Adam, Eve, the stiff-necked people, or Satan. After all, Moses eventually does agree to lead Israel, and, then, upon having engaged with Moses and Abraham regarding His plans to punish large swathes of human beings, God, on the surface at least, changes His mind.

In addition, the behavior exemplified by Abraham, Moses, and Job is not mere prayer; it does not consist of a simple plea. Nor is it simply a request for God to clarify His intentions. Job is explicit that he wants to have it out with God, not to beg for anything, while Abraham and Moses are similarly not just seeking clarity. They all provide reasons for God to act one way rather than another; in a word, they *argue* with Him.

Still more, they sometimes criticize God when they think He is being unreasonable. Abraham rebukes God’s intention to destroy all of Sodom with “Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” (Genesis 18.25), while Job declares, “God has wronged me” (19.6) and “God has deprived me of justice!” (27.2). Furthermore, there are scads of passages in the *Tanakh* that do not doubt God’s existence or His influence over the earth, but that bemoan the apparent lack of just deserts meted out to the upright and the wicked, implicitly deeming God’s world to be unjust and to require justification.

To be sure, God is not always pleased at being questioned and judged; *vide* His reply to Job (38.1–6, 40.7–8, 41.1–4). Yet, God does not punish Job for having impugned His justice, and, as noted above, sometimes God appears to “give in” or “listen to reason,” by deciding, upon reflection, to spare innocent lives or to do what it takes to uphold the covenant with Israel despite His anger.

There are indeed some passages in the *Tanakh* suggesting that one who has been created has no right to question one's creator: "Shall the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing? Your work has no handles?'" (Isaiah 45.9, echoed later in the Christian book Romans 9.20).¹⁰ Yet, even in this context, where God also calls Israel a "servant," He is more often explicitly encouraging of debate with human interlocutors about his status as Lord. Just a few chapters earlier God has urged nations, "Let them approach to state their case; Let us come forward together for argument" (Isaiah 41.1) and has said to Israel, "Let us join in argument, Tell your version" (Isaiah 43.26; see also 41.21).

One prominent message, then (accepting that it is probably not the only message), is that it can be permissible to struggle with the divine, widely taken to be the original meaning of the word "Israel" (see Genesis 32.29). Compare this sentiment with the meaning of the word "Islam," which connotes submission to God (*Qur'an* 3.19).

The *Qur'an* does not, it should be acknowledged, demand *blind* obedience. Instead, the point is repeatedly made that there are myriad signs available to human beings indicating that God and a soul are real, that the *Qur'an* is His word, and that He has the right to do as He pleases with His creation. However, there is little patience for those who do not apprehend and accept the signs, which are often labeled "clear," "self-evident," and available to anyone who pays attention (e.g., *Qur'an* 2.256, 16.10–17, 29.49). The overall import is that those who do not readily believe in God, His message in the *Qur'an*, and His authority have only themselves to blame and can expect to become a companion of the fire, to drink boiling water, and to suffer similarly "dreadful," "grievous," and "severe" penalties forever.

When it comes to Christianity, faith is of course the watchword (e.g., James 1.6; Jude 1.20–22). There are indeed doubts expressed in the Christian Bible about the status of Jesus, with Jesus providing evidence in response, for instance in the forms of predictions coming true (Mark 14.66–72) and miracles being performed (Matthew 11.2–15). However, doubting whether Jesus is the son of God is not the same as arguing with God Himself, which one readily encounters in the *Tanakh*. Perhaps the closest one comes to the latter in the Christian Bible is when Jesus on the cross implores, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15.34; Matthew 27.46). Even

10. In addition, Abraham does not put up much of a fight upon having been told to offer his son as a sacrifice (Genesis 22.1–19).

here, though, this seems more like a plea to understand than a demand for justification. Plus, by the Christian line, this is not a mere human being speaking to God, but His Son.

In sum, unlike the other religious texts prominent in the Abrahamic faiths, the *Tanakh* features human beings questioning, criticizing, and demanding justifications from God, which God often enough respects. When the humans interrogate God, they express humility, with Abraham remarking, “Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18.27) and Job in the end saying to God, “I recant and relent, Being but dust and ashes” (42.6).¹¹ Even so, the humility does not amount to servility; Abraham, Job, and Moses stood tall, having spoken their minds to God.

What does this Jewish approach to interpreting God’s will and behavior entail for meaning in life? From a perspective informed by the views of Immanuel Kant, one might say that God respects our capacity for autonomy in the process of issuing commandments, which presumably informs their content in some way, too. Running with this individualist value system consistently, one could end up with the suggestion that, in seeking to become like God and employ the intelligence that gives him a dignity, man “must become fully independent, and that means independent even from God” (Fromm 1966, 62) or “make man completely autonomous, even to the point where he will be free from God” (Fromm 1966, 77; see also 78–81, peppered with quotes from the *Talmud* and Hasidic literature). However, one might instead invoke relational values to understand the nature of the meaning-conferring relationship with God. Another way of interpreting the permissibility of challenging God is in terms not of autonomy, which is conceptually compatible with distance and isolation, but instead cooperation. Here, Jewish thinkers often quote the prescription to “walk modestly with your God” (Micah 6.8) and frequently speak of being a “co-worker” (e.g., Trepp 1962, 134; Borowitz 1979, 222) or “co-creator” (Thiede 2016, 169) with God. Additional relational language that is common to encounter is talk of “partnership,” “love,” and “communion,” with a typical example here: “Torah learning elicits a divine-human partnership, a continuing relationship of teacher and taught, of lover and beloved. It is not submission but communion, in which the engagement of the intellect is essential to approaching God” (Soloveichik 2010). Rather than emphasize

11. For a fascinating argument that Job does not in fact recant, see Miles (1995, 308–28).

independence, the focus here is interdependence, with God needing our help in order to realize His plan completely and at times having to justify His actions to us.

Consider how both approaches, of autonomy/independence and relationality/interdependence, differ from the images characteristic of the other two Abrahamic faiths. In Christianity, the child/father analogy is prominent (consider the Apostle's creed)¹² and in Islam it is the servant (or slave)/master analogy that predominates (*Qur'an* 18.65, 19.30, 19.93, 21.26, 39.36)—and without the apparent permissibility of remonstrance. Servants are not meant to question their masters, nor are children to question their fathers. Insofar as meaning in life is a function of making sense of one's life, being able to identify with what one is doing, and meriting pride in oneself, the Jewish approach of "making a case" in the face of apparent injustice should be welcome relative to more servile ways of interacting with God.¹³

OBEDIENCE OF A PEOPLE

The previous section considered how to go about ascertaining what God's will is and whether He is abiding by His own terms, whereas the one before it had considered how God would respond to those who obey His will. In contrast, this section considers the bearer of meaning, that is, which dimension of human life can exhibit meaning or fail to do so. Up to now, the implicit supposition has been that it is an individual person whose life can be meaningful or not, depending on whether and how she obeys God's will. However, further reflection on Judaism occasions doubt about whether that is the only sort of human life that can sensibly have meaning or fail to have it.

In particular, often enough in the *Torah* and the greater *Tanakh* it is Israel, considered as a people or nation, that is commanded to obey God and hence understood to live meaningfully to the extent that it does. Although it is not easy to say what a people is, it is at least clearly a group that, although composed of individuals, is not reducible to them, insofar as it persists despite

12. Of course there have been exceptions, with Process Theology being one (idiosyncratic) strain of Christian thought attempting to capture God's need for us.

13. There is a fresh debate among analytic philosophers of religion about whether God's existence is unwelcome for requiring us (in my terms) to "bend the knee" (e.g., Kahane 2011, 2018). However, this argument for an atheist world would, if successful, apply to all forms of monotheism, whereas in this article I am interested strictly in motivating a Jewish approach relative to Abrahamic rivals.

its members changing. A nation is in this respect like a sports team or a political party. Note that to form the specific kind of group that is a people, as distinct from a sports team, it is not sufficient to be in the same space or have a common ethnic heritage. Something more cohesive is needed, for we can imagine a number of individuals who are spatially or genetically contiguous (or both), but lacking the unity intuitively required to form a nation. At least part of what constitutes a people, I suggest, is a common sense of self grounded on a shared culture. A people exists when a sufficient number of individuals jointly judge “This is who we are” in respect of such things as values, metaphysical beliefs, language, stories, books, laws, rituals, food and drink, clothing, shelter, artistic expression, technologies, and history.

Although it would be of philosophical interest to be more precise about what a people is as distinct from a person, sports team, or political party, the above characterization should be enough to make headway on issues of life’s meaning. According to a plain reading of the *Tanakh*, some of God’s purposes are assigned specifically to Israel, a group whose members identify with one another in respect of a cultural way of life (or ways of life, if one insists on focusing on dynamism and particularity). There are many clear passages in the *Tanakh* stating that Israel is God’s “chosen” or “treasured” people, the one he loves most, favors relative to other nations, and will reward the most if it obeys Him.

For many centuries, Jews and non-Jews have asked why God should have chosen Israel instead of another people, with one influential biblical answer being that God has called upon Israel, the first to acknowledge Him, to serve as an example to other peoples of how to be upright. On the face of it, it does seem as though some meaning could accrue to a people if it had begun an intellectual-moral spark and so were selected to shine as a light to other nations (the influential language of Isaiah 42.6). Some are happy to accept such a conception of being chosen as a source of meaning:

Only in Israel did an ethical monotheism exist. . . . That is what is meant by the *election* of Israel. . . . [T]here was assigned to this people a peculiar position in the world by which it is distinguished from all other peoples. . . . The difference is acknowledged as something which lends meaning to the life of Israel. . . . [The] nation bears the duty to proclaim the One God to the whole world. (Baeck 1948, 61, 68)

Furthermore, even if God's favoritism were utterly arbitrary, perhaps it could confer some meaning, for, after all, my decision to love this woman presumably makes her life more meaningful, even if she was not most deserving and there had been good reason to choose other women. God just happens to like Israel best—what more could you want when it comes to meaning?

Upon reflection, many of us do want more, in the sense of it being in principle possible for all nations to be comparably meaningful, if any one of them can be meaningful. The problem has to do with thinking of God as the ultimate source of meaning for all human beings. Insofar as a spiritual person grounds meaning in human life, He should not be the one to confer differential degrees of it *from the start*. God might sensibly allow differential degrees of meaning to come to nations in the course of their interaction; perhaps His need to respect our free will means that God must allow evil in the form of one nation oppressing another, thereby reducing meaning in the life of the latter (and in that of the former precisely because of that). In addition, God might reward some nations more than others for the choices they have made, where the reward might be meaningful to receive. However, a just God would not Himself from the get-go prevent some nations from living as meaningfully as others.

There are two relevant differences between God loving one people more than other peoples and me loving one woman instead of other women. One is that I have a finite amount of love to give, whereas if God loves, He can love all. Another is that if I do not love other women, they have a terrific chance of finding love elsewhere, whereas *by Judaism's own tenets* God is the ultimate source of meaning, so that if He gives one people more meaning, or a greater opportunity for more of it, there is no other source available to the other peoples. It will hardly do to suggest that other peoples could acquire meaning from serving as a negative lesson to others, as in "Don't act like them!" (which Nozick 1981, 586 points out).

Hence, there is indeed a problem with thinking of God's having chosen Israel to serve as an example of how to live according to His laws, or of God's arbitrarily loving Israel, as sources of meaning. Such ways of relating to Israel would give it a leg up, compared to what other nations could achieve in relation to God. We therefore are driven to a broader, *Tanakhish* principle about a supra-individual bearer of meaning: the more that a people elects to walk in the ways of the Lord, the more meaningful its existence. *Perhaps*

on this score Martin Buber is right when he says of Israel, “There is one nation that once heard this charge [to perfect our own portion of the universe] so loudly and clearly that the charge penetrated to the very depths of its soul” (1967, 182).

In the first instance, this principle entails that the significance of a people lies in how it treats other peoples. If one nation colonized, exploited, or were cruel to another nation, it would reduce the former’s meaning (and plausibly would do so in virtue of having reduced the latter’s meaning). In contrast if one nation freed another one from such conditions, or gave to it charitably so as to foster its culture, it would enhance the former’s meaning (and plausibly would do so in virtue of having enhanced the latter’s meaning).

However, it is plausible to think that walking in the ways of the Lord goes beyond inter-national relationships and includes intra-national ones. In this respect, some will point out that God has commanded a certain way of life in the *Torah*, concerning how people should dress, eat, pray, and the like. The more the members of a nation do things such as wear a prayer shawl (the *tallit*), slaughter animals in a particular way (keep *kosher*), and avoid work on Saturday (observe *shabbat*), the more significant its existence. From this perspective, there is a uniquely correct way that people should live together, with Judaism being it as prescribed by God.

However, another, and presumably more welcome, approach is to view a Jewish way of life as an exemplar (even if not the only one) of the way that a people could obtain meaning by virtue of its members interacting with each other. By this approach, the more intensely the members of a nation commune with each other, the more significant its existence. The more that the members of a nation over time think of themselves as a “we,” take pride and shame in one another’s successes and failures (respectively), participate on an evenhanded basis in pursuit of shared ends, uphold traditions such as holidays and festivals, and strive to help one another, the stronger the nation is and the more meaningful the course of its life. It is not merely an individual person who can realize the true, the good, and the beautiful—conceived as holiness after God’s knowledge, love, and creativity—but also a people. Judaism is one way that persons have organized themselves into such a “community” (in the words of Buber 1967, 110–23) or formed a “communal life” (in the words of Kaplan 1981), and they have strikingly done so for thousands of years.

It was on something like this basis that contemporary thought about genocide was initially founded. As is well known, Raphael Lemkin coined

the term “genocide” and conceived of it as a systematic attack on a people, not merely an attack on many persons. He conceived of a people *qua* people as meriting protection from attack largely because of the meaningfulness both of how its internal way of life is structured and of what it could offer to those outside it, too: “[T]he idea of a nation signifies constructive cooperation and original contributions, based on genuine traditions, genuine culture, and a well-developed national psychology. The destruction of a nation, therefore, results in the loss of its future contributions to the world” (Lemkin 1944, 91). Such destruction, for Lemkin, could take the form of taking the lives of enough of the group’s members, but it could also consist of seeking to undermine its way of life (Lemkin 1944, 79).

Whereas Judaism clearly conceives of a people as an important bearer of meaning, the idea is salient in neither Christianity nor Islam (even if it is not utterly absent from them). The latter Abrahamic faiths focus on the individual, or sometimes the human race as a whole, as what God has created for certain purposes. For standard understandings of both faiths, the meaning of one’s life as an individual consists of obeying God’s will on earth and, consequent to that, enjoying an eternal afterlife with Him in Heaven. For both, the meaning of the human race is having been intentionally created by God in order to help realize His plan for the universe, which is, roughly, to realize Himself and overcome evil. Christians tend to think in terms of a universal brotherhood of humankind, and, as is well known, their religion developed in some ways expressly to counter the nationalism of Judaism. Of course the church is important, particularly for Catholics, but normally the church is viewed as a conduit for meaning in the lives of its members, not as an important bearer of meaning itself. Muslims will sometimes focus on the *ummah*, those who share Islamic religious beliefs, but that is a mighty big “community” or “nation,” is in principle open to all human beings, and is easily joined, with it taking little to convert.¹⁴ In contrast, it is hard to become a Jew if one is not already, and the number of Jews is quite small, both of which factors probably facilitate much richer communal ties. A people is neither a church of a few hundred nor a community of 1.5 billion.

Analytic philosophers have followed the largely Christian-Muslim approach to what can be the bearer of life’s meaning, but, in the light of

14. The word *ummah* does get used at times in the *Qur’an* to denote various peoples, ranging from the people of Moses to Arabs, who each receive their own prophets. However, eventually it is used there more narrowly to signify Muslims, and that has been the dominant meaning since (on which see Denny 1975).

the above analysis, they should reconsider whether that is too narrow. It is common now in that literature to draw a distinction between the meaning “in” life and the meaning “of” life (e.g., Wolf 2007, 63; Seachris 2013, 3–4). The former issue, regarding the meaning in a life, is about whether and how a given person’s life can be meaningful. What, if anything, about one of our lives can merit admiration, or which goods should a person seek out that are worth much more than base pleasures, or how, if at all, can one live in a way that would ground a compelling autobiography? The latter issue is, in contrast, roughly about whether there is a point to the existence of the human race as a species. Is there a purpose for which we were all created, or is there a way for humanity to connect with something highly valuable beyond itself, or is there a good story available about the human race in relation to the course of the universe?

An extremely large majority of contemporary English-speaking philosophy about life’s meaning addresses one or both of these questions, taking the bearer of meaning to be either the life of an individual or, less often, the species (for comprehensive surveys, see Metz 2013b, 2019; Seachris 2020). Religiously oriented or supernaturalist theorists of meaning have, as noted above, usually been Christian, typically maintaining that meaning in life is a function of accepting Jesus as one’s savior, which could well involve emulating Jesus while on earth and then eternally enjoying the Beatific Vision,¹⁵ and that the meaning of life is for humanity to help God defeat Satan and other instances of evil (e.g., Craig 2000; Quinn 2000; Seachris 2016; Swinburne 2016). Secular or naturalist theorists of meaning in life have either been subjectivists or objectivists about the kind of value that confers meaning, and, on the rare occasions when they have addressed the meaning of life, have suggested that humanity could have a point, say, by fighting injustice, either as an aggregate or more collectively (e.g., Trisel 2016).

The Jewish tradition offers a third, grossly under-considered approach to which sort of human life can exhibit meaning or fail to do so, namely, that of a people, something larger than an individual but smaller than the human race. Judaism distinctively suggests that meaning can inhere in a group the culture of which grounds a shared identity among its members, where that communal life can be meaningful both in itself and in virtue of how it contributes to those outside it.

15. The ideal of bodily resurrection is not prominent among analytic Christian philosophers of meaning in life, but for an exception see Baker (2017).

CONCLUSION

I began this article by noting common ground among the three Abrahamic faiths, and indicating that I set myself the tasks of seeking respects in which Judaism (and principally the *Tanakh*) is somewhat distinct from the other two and of providing some support for their implications for life's meaning relative to rivals. This approach led me to set aside familiar suggestions that meaning comes from relating to a singular perfect person who is the source of the universe, and specifically by fulfilling purposes He has assigned, which purposes include honoring Him and treating those made in His image well. To find clearer respects in which Judaism differs from Christianity and Islam, I considered views about how God would respond to our doing His bidding, how we should interact with Him as we strive to do so, and who it is that can be assigned a purpose. With respect to all three matters, I argued that there are views salient (or at least more prominent) in Judaism, particularly in the *Tanakh*, that are not (or at least are not as prominent) in the key texts of Christianity and Islam and that ground plausible conceptions of life's meaning.

Sometimes I argued that Judaism's approaches to meaning are supported by views that contemporary analytic philosophers tend to deem plausible. For instance, these days a majority in the field believe that a meaningful life is possible even if we are mortal, and specifically that it could come from relating to others, including God, in ways that avoid servility. However, other times I argued that Judaism's approaches to meaning are plausible and provide reason for analytic philosophers to reconsider their dominant views. Here, recall the characteristically Jewish perspectives that (great) meaning in life would come from an eternal afterlife without any possibility of Hell, and that a people, and not merely a person, can be what exhibits meaning.

I conclude this article by suggesting some other respects in which Judaism might be fairly distinctive and that might merit exploration in other work. I obviously did not find them as compelling as the approaches discussed in this article, and below I indicate why, without wanting to discount them entirely. Perhaps others will see more than I did.¹⁶

Many Jewish philosophers have suggested that central to the *Torah's* commandments is the principle that one should imitate God, a promising

16. Additional themes might include the prominence of suffering and of a sense of having been abandoned by God. However, I take these to be dimensions of an apparent lack of justice, and so implicitly addressed above.

religious conception of how to make life meaningful. This perspective harks back to Maimonides in the twelfth century (*Mishneh Torah*, Ethical Ideas, 6) and, more recently, has grounded some of the thought of Martin Buber (with the original German translated and quoted in Barton 2014, 263), Erich Fromm (1966), and Joseph Soloveitchik (in Besdin 1979, 23–30).

While I believe the principle is indeed an appealing supernaturalist view of what would confer meaning on life, it is not as distinct from Christianity and Islam as the other approaches discussed in this article.¹⁷ Although Christianity most often suggests that we should imitate the example of Jesus, there are passages suggesting that we should imitate God (including God *qua* Father, e.g., Matthew 5.48; Luke 6.36; Ephesians 5.1), while *Imitatio Dei* is widely taken to be a core principle of Catholicism. And although Islam most often prescribes imitating Mohammed, this saying is frequently ascribed to him: “Create in yourselves the attributes of God” (*Takhallaq bi-akhlaq Allah*).

Perhaps, though, most Muslims would find *Imitatio Dei* to be heretical for suggesting we could approximate anything godlike. And one might try to argue that the logic of Christianity best supports a “Do as I say, not as I do” principle, insofar as punishment (justice, vengeance) is clearly reserved for God to mete out, with humans instructed to turn the other cheek upon being wronged and at least to repay no one evil for evil (Matthew 5.38–40; Romans 12.17–21).

A second angle that merits consideration is the fact that, for much of Judaism, the messiah is yet to come (for a thorough overview, see Ariel 1995, 211–46). Sometimes the messiah is understood to be a person with supernatural powers who will come to save Israel by changing human nature and overturning the world’s sociopolitical order. Other times, as with Maimonides (*Mishneh Torah*, Kings, 11–12), the messiah is construed in resolutely human terms as an ideal king who will restore Israel to its glory, particularly by giving it national independence and the ability to live a fully Jewish life in peace. The difference with Christianity, according to which the savior has already come in the form of Jesus, is clear. Islam tends to grant the label of “messiah” to Jesus in the *Qur’an*, and instead in the *hadith* uses the term “*Mahdi*” for a personal redeemer related to Mohammed who will spread justice and vanquish Islam’s rivals.

17. And, indeed, it is explicit in and central to John Cottingham’s (2003: 52–53, 2005: 37–57) influential Christian philosophy of life’s meaning.

Setting aside whether messianism in Judaism is sufficiently distinct from the Islamic form, or is at least more prominent in Judaism than in Islam, it is not clear how the prospect of a messiah might bear on life's meaning. Robert Nozick asserts that the "most exalted and far-reaching life or role imagined for man" is to be the messiah (1981, 597), which is fair. The messiah's life would probably be maximally meaningful—but what about the rest of us? Are our lives meaningful to the extent that we help create the conditions under which the messiah would emerge? Or does the concept peter out into the idea that meaning in life would come from doing whatever one can to support one's people or to repair the world?

Exile is a third Jewish trope that might have a bearing on issues of meaning in life. One thinker remarks, "Dispersion is willed by God; it has a purpose. It is a permanent condition of Jewish life" (Trepp 1962, 25). While that is probably overstating the case, the suggestion that substantial meaning can come from being away from home is interesting. Recall that Abraham is directed by God to leave his country and to settle in a new territory where he is to found a "great nation" (Genesis 12.1) and that for much of the past two thousand years Jews have been diasporic.

We often associate meaning with connecting positively to what is beyond ourselves (emphasized in Nozick 1981, 594-612), and, so, is "participation in the development of the countries where Jews may live—even if they are treated unjustly there" (Trepp 1962, 25) well understood as a way to do that? Or might it be that a genuine connection with God requires one to be in exile, that is, isolated and different from other people (suggested in Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*)? Or is it the case that particularly substantial meaning, whether directly in relation to God or otherwise, can come only from engaging with what is unfamiliar? Think, here, of explorers discovering uninhabited parts of the earth, or cosmologists becoming aware of uncharted parts of space, or even analytic philosophers making a theoretical advance, one that marks new intellectual territory. I cannot claim substantial meaning to have been conferred by having composed this article, but I do hope that it has shed light on Judaism's bearing on the analytic philosophy of life's meaning that was, before it, not well known.

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