

Disagreeing in the Service of God

Jews and Christians need one another, argues an esteemed Orthodox rabbi in his latest book.

An interview with Rabbi Irving Greenberg

After the publication of "For the Sake of Heaven and Earth," Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg spoke to Beliefnet senior editor Alice Chasan about the book, which traces the development of his thinking about Jewish-Christian relations and argues for a pluralist theology that commands followers of each religion to embrace the unique contributions of the other.

You've spent many years dedicating yourself to Jewish-Christian dialogue. What is your goal?

Who said I have a goal? What I mean by that is that, as I indicated in the book's opening essay, some of this grew out of the experience. I didn't necessarily know what I was doing when I started. Therefore, my comment is, this is all retrospection. I think the big issue that I stumbled into unintentionally, perhaps, is one of the big issues of religion of our time—the encounter of powerful and meaningful religions with each other, in what I think is unprecedented in human history. It is a direct and unmediated encounter—and in what is in many ways a highly open and sympathetic environment between religions, identities, and cultures. This is the underlying issue of pluralism and of freedom. I confess I didn't start with those ideas. In the modern era, people for the first time in history were brought together geographically in the cities, culturally open to one another. For the first time, the "Other" is no longer other.

This incredible, unmediated encounter has led to a kind of crisis and an opportunity. The crisis is that most identities and value systems were dependent on each group's superiority claims. Suddenly, every alternative lifestyle and value system and religion is available. And they're nice people; they're attractive. They're your next door neighbors. It's led to three different trends. The first, and the most powerful, is the trend of relativism. You discover that the portraits of the other in your tradition were false and demeaning. And in the end, nothing is fixed, and anything goes. That explains secularization and relativism.

The counter-reaction, we're seeing now in a scary way, is fundamentalism and all its offshoots, including the violent offshoots. We have to violently repress the alternatives, because that's the only way we can save the truth. So you close down the TV, as in the haredi (ultra-Orthodox Jewish Israeli) community, or you blow up the alternative, as in the jihadist psychology and you impose the "will of God" on other people.

When I started, it was the shock of the Holocaust. It was coming to grips with the legacy of hatred and hostility that Christianity had generated in Western culture and around the Jews. So I joined the issue initially with a kind of not very dialogic approach. I felt like I was coming to challenge and criticize Christianity to stop spreading hatred about Jews. The only thing I'll say in self-defense is that I discovered in the dialogue that I was right. I also came to see that that was not a refutation of Christianity, it was a call for Christianity to live up to its own best values.

And of course, as I describe in the book, there were Christians ahead of me who saw this. So paradoxically, in this encounter, it became a true dialogue, where I began to realize the true power, and the values and the strength of true Christianity. And so I began to ask myself, is Judaism fair and proper in its understanding of Christianity? That's how I moved into a pluralism, because I came to see the power of the other's side and realized that it was exactly the denial of pluralism that explains much of the hostility and the hatred of the Holocaust.

In this book, you've set out to reconcile the theology of Judaism with that of Christianity.

You use the word "reconcile." The book argues that there are and will be important ongoing conflicts between the two religions. It's just that those disagreements are for the sake of heaven, not to be seen as denying the other side. In other words, part of pluralism is that you don't necessarily reconcile or come to agreement. But you do understand the validity and the role of the other even when they disagree.

So you're uncomfortable with the term "reconcile"?

Yes, because in some sense, I feel one of the great lessons of pluralism is that you end up with religions that are in some ways contradictory or disagreeing, nevertheless you recognize that there is a legitimacy or a truth behind them. And I've come to see that that is good. Even though we continue to disagree, we can be disagreeing in the service of God, or about what's the best way, without undermining the basic legitimacy of the other side.

What would you say are the three biggest theological problems Judaism has with Christianity?

There's disagreements that should continue, and disagreements that are problems and should be stopped. For example, the Christian claim to absolute truth which supercedes Judaism, and which says that Judaism has lost its validity—that has been historically the main problem. And of course it took a much uglier form in violence and suppression and hate-mongering. So that's probably the single biggest problem, that has to be ended. And my argument is that Christianity—various denominations—has already taken major moves in that direction. In the book I refer to papal statements, including Pope John Paul II's statements, that affirm the ongoing validity of the Jewish covenant.

The renunciation of violence, the recognition of past sin—those are all serious attempts to overcome the main historical problem, which is the claim of supercession, and the consequent tradition of contempt—that Judaism is legalism, it's soulless, that Jews are Christ-killers or children of the Devil. It produced everything from the charge that Jews drank Christian children's blood to stereotypes on a more subtle level—that Judaism's God is the God of wrath while the Christians believe in a God of love, for example. The Christian attempt to renounce these perspectives is the most heartening examples in history of self-correction, and I credit Christians for it.

It's not finished yet, because there's a gap between the advanced thinkers and the authorities, and the people in the pews. It's not finished yet because the Gospels themselves remain sources of some of these ugly images.

How about the messianic conception of the two religions?

The other two main ongoing differences I think will remain, at least until the Messiah comes. The first of these is the Christian claim that God became flesh—Jesus as one of the personalities of God, and the Trinity. That whole complex is the second major disagreement. From a Jewish perspective, that is a departure from pure monotheism. Now, having said that, it's one of the strong arguments in my book that Christianity is a monotheistic religion. That trinitarianism doesn't mean three gods, and therefore while it's a departure from the purity of Jewish monotheism, it doesn't invalidate Christianity.

I think Jews have to be open to the idea that God speaks in different ways to different people. It's God's way of speaking to the gentiles, bringing them in parallel without replacing Judaism. Therefore Jews don't have to sit around trying to refute other religions. We can say firmly and respectfully, that the logic behind incarnation and God becoming flesh is the shared value system: Both religions believe that life will win out over death—resurrection is the climax of that process—because it's God's will that the world will be made perfect, and that this will be accomplished by a partnership, a covenant between God and humanity, which expresses itself in many religions and many covenants, including Judaism and Christianity.

Why does Christianity end up saying God became flesh? The logic is that humans can't do it alone, they need a leader, a mediator, a role model. Judaism also acknowledges that, but Judaism argues that the mediating and the role modeling has been humans, whether Moses or a priest in the Temple or rabbis. Judaism doesn't deny the need for mediation. It just said, despite their sinfulness and limitations, humans can connect to God directly. Whereas Christianity says God had to personally overcome the human limitations. So as a Jew I can respect the logic of that, coming out of the Jewish tradition—namely idea of covenant—but Judaism doesn't view God needing to become human. Rather, humans can become more godlike. God reaches humans through speech, through revelation, and humans reach God through repentance and through spirituality.

Christians have to resist the temptation of saying, well my God became human, and therefore it is superior. Jews have to resist the other temptation: You claim God became

flesh, you must be idolaters. Let's face it, that's where the majority of Jewish traditional views ended up: viewing Christianity as idolatry. The anti-Christian polemic was, you're worshipping idols. The real concern was, you're teaching hatred, you're killing Jews.

Jews should see that trinitarianism should not be dismissed as idolatry, but be recognized as an attempt bring non-Jews to worship the same God as the Jews worship. Jews should not dismiss it as idolatry. That view doesn't do justice to the richness and complexity of Christian faith.

So again we'll have a fundamental difference ongoing between the two religions. I don't expect Christians to give up Jesus or make him into simple a human being. Although I think one of the most striking things about modern Christian theology independent of the Jewish question is just that: that Christians have tried to articulate that Jesus brings people to God, Jesus is the vehicle. They're trying in many ways without repudiating—although some rationalist groups such as Unitarians have in fact repudiated the trinity—to minimize that aspect and to deepen the point that in the end it is the God who happens to be the God of Israel that we're also worshipping.

Some Jews think of Jesus as a "failed Messiah." Can you explain that?

That's the third major ongoing difference. Classically, the Christian position was the Messiah came. Classically, the Jewish answer was, the Messiah didn't come. Look around and see the evil world. I argue in the book that that difference will continue—is meant to continue—until the Messiah completes the job. Both sides tacitly admit the truth of the other's claim, in part.

For example, Christians, in talking about the Second Coming, admit tacitly that the Messiah didn't finish the job and that the world is still not redeemed and perfect. The wrong way Christians sought to solve that tension was to say the Messiah is not a matter of politics or economics; the Messiah is spiritual, and that's 100% available right now. Jews, in contrast, insist that perfection includes economic, social, and cultural dignity, and the triumph of life is not just spiritual, it's physical as well.

So I think that was a Christian mistake, growing out in part of their superiority feelings toward Judaism. You're carnal and we're spiritual: That's why we're superior. That was a bad way of handling the controversy, and it shows that arrogance leads to conflict. The Jews argued that all you had to do was look at the world to see that the Christian messianic claims were false. Yet the Jewish Sabbath is a kind of mini-messianic world. There are a hundred ways that Jews act on Shabbat as if the Messiah has come already, as if the world is perfect.

So the claim that the messiah is already here is a legitimate claim to make. But the Jewish claim that the world is not yet redeemed is also legitimate. What I'm calling for in the book is that the two sides should get together and work for that.

In the history of this polemic, Christians said Jews are blind; otherwise you would have accepted Jesus as the Messiah, but someday you'll wake up. And the Jewish reaction was, this is a false messiah; you're preaching nonsense.

My argument is that one way to see Jesus is as a failed messiah—something I proposed a number of years ago—and what I meant was that the world is not yet complete. Jesus taught the right values; Jesus tried to bring the righteous kingdom. That's a much more respectful title than "false messiah."

I gave the example from Maimonides' work. He said that people like Bar Kochba are to be treated as kings of Israel who didn't complete the work. They failed, but they're certainly considered righteous, and to be respected and treated with honor.

Most Jews were angry at me for calling Jesus a messiah, as I recount in the book. Most Christians were also angry, saying that by using the word "failed," I was putting Jesus down. However, some Christians got what I was doing from the beginning—the image of Jesus on the cross dying is a classic image of failure. He could have flexed his muscles and wiped out all the Romans. Instead, it was a statement of humility and of unfinished business.

Since that concept didn't go over well on either side (laughter), I try again in this book to say maybe the way to talk about him is as an "unfinished messiah" to the gentiles. Unfinished, because the work is unfinished. And I think any reasonable Christian today who has transcended the old polemic would acknowledge this. Most Christians would acknowledge that the ideal of redemption includes or should include political, economic, social conditions. When people are living on a dollar a day, when women are still being raped in war or sold for sexual use, it's not a redeemed world. And recognizing that doesn't undercut Christianity.

The challenge to Christians is to finish the mission. And the challenge to Jews is to recognize that Jesus and Christianity should be seen not as an evil force in the world but that Jewish has brought the news of God to hundreds of millions who Jews would never have reached. Christianity has been a force for improving the world and for redeeming politically and socially. I'm not denying the other side—that Christianity was a servant or a collaborator with imperialism. But Christians are trying to renounce this past; Jews should help them do so. Judaism has a stake in Christianity, just as Christianity has a stake in Judaism.

You don't mince words about the failures of Jews and Christians to let go of the triumphalist views of each other's religions. Is it possible for most people to see and be persuaded by your argument?

I think ordinary people have been way ahead of the theologians and the authorities. The rethinking of Jewish-Christian relations started when Jews and Christians started to meet each other in the early modern period, to become neighbors and friends and mutually respectful. In many ways, my argument is that they common people have been ahead of

the leaders in recognizing this truth. The leaders were constrained by the inherited theology, or inherited authority systems. They're catching up now.

This is the great struggle in the field: People are asking, is the right answer a plague on all your houses? Religion is a source of conflict, and any time you take them literally or seriously they make big trouble. Forget it. That's the relativist position that has been widely accepted.

Doesn't that view get more persuasive in the 21st century, when we've seen the effect of religious extremism?

That's why pluralism is so key. The weakness of either the relativist or the fundamentalist position is that you get a new absolutism. In Soviet Russia, in order to get rid of religion to bring a better world, they ended up with a new absolute that persecuted Jews and Christians and others. So relativism inevitably turns into a new absolutism. It's a powerful force of homogenization—no religions make a difference, so it becomes a global religion of materialism and consumerism. The triumph of relativism means you can't make judgments, you can't make value statements. It cripples the capacity to call wrong wrong, the capacity of good to defend itself against evil. In the end, it tends to become an oppressive form, either by law or through a tyranny of opinion that mocks religion and tries to drive it away.

The danger the other way, with fundamentalism, is again that religion becomes a source of violence and hatred in the name of God.

God's call to our generation is to turn this exposure [of religions to one another in a pluralist society] into a source of life and goodness, not death and evil. And that is to be done not through giving up religion, but to modulate and understand our worldviews in relation to one another, making room for variety and disagreement--an affirmation of diversity, which reflects God's love for humans and human diversity. If God spoke to me, that doesn't mean that God never spoke to anybody else. If I've made a good religion, that doesn't mean nobody else has made a good religion. That's the key breakthrough. Only pluralism can protect against the kind of absolute totalitarian tendencies present to the left and to the right.

Has the pluralistic experiment has played out most fully here in the United States?

It's mostly played out in the West, where the democratic forces are strongest. The United States is one example. Britain, Europe, Israel are other democracies where they've established pluralism, rather than one official religion and persecution of the others.

You write about the difference between disputes that can lead to tikkun olam (repair of the world), and those that only "bring chaos into the world." Can you give examples of each kind?

I felt a little risky in doing this. I took a term from the Talmudic controversy for the sake of heaven (Pirke Avot 5:19). The Talmud applies it to disputes between the schools of Hillel and Shammai, and I apply it to religions which historically saw each other as highly contradictory. That's the risk. Why do I say that? It's one of the glories of modern culture that it enables us to see a wider perspective.

Historically, Jews thought inside Judaism and Christians inside Christianity. But by stretching our minds and bringing the other into our life in a real way, it's a breakthrough for the image of God. The dignity, the infinite value, the uniqueness of the other is now upheld by the daily experiences in a way it never was before. And that's why, when children starve in Niger or women are being abused in Darfur, I get it because I see it literally before my eyes. I can't dismiss it, I see the pain in their faces. So right there is a major breakthrough, if we handle it right.

So, if I can now see that despite our disagreements, Christianity and Judaism or other religions in fact are playing a constructive role, then I have to recognize that the disagreements are themselves for the sake of heaven because they are making the world better despite the disagreements, and because the disagreement enables us to deal better with the issues. For example, is the key to religion someone who believes choosing and expressing his belief in a fellowship of believers, and that's Christianity's primary claim is *is* you're born again a Christian, and the true religion consists of those who share this belief and act on it and create a community around it. I think there's a profound truth in that picture. It doesn't do justice to another truth: There is a genetic, family, biological component to solidarity, to community, and to family, which people share. That's very powerful. I didn't choose it, I'm born into it.

Let me sharpen that: I feel a humanitarian obligation to help my fellow human being, but it's not just an intellectual or a spiritual commitment; it's elemental, it's family. One of the great ideals, captured particularly in the Jewish tradition, is birth, family as a key transmission belt, in the sense of community and family. And it's almost like biological, elemental. And somebody a thousand, or 5,000, or 8,000 miles away is starving, it's my child, my family who's starving, and of course I'm going to be energized.

Look what happened in Ethiopia, where Jews were starving and being abused, when the community rallied and raised hundreds of millions of dollars, flew them to Israel, gave them a new life. There's a real power to understanding religion as family transmission.

Having said that, both are true. And Christianity, while the dominant form has been the other, has certainly slipped into many Christian denominations, a kind of family, birth transmission. And on the other side, Judaism has conversion, has Bar Mitzvah; all kinds of ceremonies designed to bring out the intellectual, spiritual choice. So between the two of us, the whole thing is represented most better than through either side alone. So we can balance and rebalance by seeing the other as the mirror from which I learn.

The other example: The Christian thrust toward spirituality; this became a dominant trend in Christianity. I think that's a real contribution, and to be honest, medieval Judaism

had a lot of that, [Orthodox Judaism](#) has a lot of that same tendency. But then there's the other side; the carnal, the political, the cultural. The human being is a body, not just a soul; carnal in the positive sense. To me, if the Christians had listened more to Jews and hung around more with Jews, they would have balanced this better. So the carnal Jesus, the human Jesus, would be appreciated more and the body would be appreciated more. And to me that's one of the genius of resurrection; because immortality means the eternal soul. The genius of resurrection; which both religions teach, by the way, and which Christianity got from Judaism; that the body is as important as the soul. So the statement of God's victory is not just that the soul lives on, but the unity of the human being. The greatness of the biblical tradition is that it teaches that.

It's impossible to make a perfect balance of social justice and spiritual perfection, of body and soul. So at any one time, one of these religions is emphasizing more the body and one the soul. But if they would see this as a disagreement for the sake of heaven, they would each incorporate the other's insights and each would rebalance in an ongoing, dynamic way. And the truth is, that's what's happening. Christianity, in modern times, went back and reread the Hebrew scriptures, the Prophets, and they have incorporated more of that.

Now let me give you the counterexample: One of the ways in which liberation theology, which is again, liberating and constructive, and borrows heavily from Exodus and the Prophets, has turned around and is using it tendentiously against Jews, saying, "You don't need a country, you don't need a physical location. The true spiritually great religion would say, the whole world is god's temple, and true spirituality doesn't need political power or geographic location." But I think that's a gross misreading. In the end, human dignity comes in part from being able to say there's a country where I am at home. Again, Christianity tends to overlook and underestimate the significance of geography, locus, physical rootedness, and therefore I think it loses as a religion. And looking at Judaism, Christianity can recapture some of that. The controversy for the sake of heaven means that both religion covers more of the spectrum of religious behavior, and together they rebalance themselves.

On one hand, you're holding up the model of Jacob and Esau as a paradigm of healing after a terrible breach, in this case, as you say, "overcoming the past and embracing each other in forgiveness and love" is the goal for Jews and Christians. You're also saying don't take advantage of those connections to argue for converting Jews to Christianity. You call that "a historical abuse."

What I'm saying is that convergence, closeness, partnership is the will of God, but there are people of good intentions and bad intentions out there, and I've become sensitized to that. My fear is that there are in fact millions of Jews who are drifting, who are not integrated into the community and are not religiously knowledgeable; and for them there is always that anxiety. In the past, one of the things that kept them Jewish and prevented Christians from obliterating Judaism by pulling them into Christianity was that they historically felt that Christians are persecutors, goyim. So when I say that

Christianity should be seen as the closest living religion to Judaism and as partner, I stand behind it as the future and as the way to go.

But I have to recognize that there are people of ill will; there are Christian missionaries who still believe that Christianity is the only valid religion. There are Jews for Jesus who use the trappings of Judaism to bring people into a religion that teaches that Judaism is finished. Jews for Jesus are worse theologically than the mainstream of Catholicism or Protestantism, which now affirm that Judaism is a valid religion. Jews for Jesus say that it is not. They use the Jewish trappings, but de facto, they are teaching the classic Christian supersessionism--that Judaism was at best a foreshadowing of Christianity.

But what about conversion on the personal level? You're advocating greater understanding, and recognizing points of commonality and the familial relationship that Jews and Christians have to each other, and inevitably there are going to be some people who are going to fall in love with either Judaism or Christianity from within the other religion?

You're right. There my answer, very simply, is that is the implication of living in this age of freedom and choice that I've been speaking about. It's the will of God; we've reached the state of freedom in which people will no longer be coerced or burnt at the stake if they convert to the other religion. I think that you're quite right--in the age of freedom, the individual may, in fact, be born in one and choose another. But if a Jew would choose a hateful, murderous, antagonistic religion, I would certainly be a lot more upset than if they chose a loving, positive religion. But the possibility of conversion--I don't think that's a danger to Judaism or to Christianity, and I think it's an affirmation of human dignity that people cannot be forced to stay in the religion they were born in or the religion cannot be denied to them.

That being said, that's not what I'm writing about. One can't be naïve; I can't make believe that we're talking in a world of pure dialogue and respect for one another. There are tens if not hundreds of millions of Christians who still believe that Judaism has been superseded, still believe that the only way to salvation is through Jesus. I just want to make sure that those people do not misuse what I'm saying in a spiritually imperialist form.

You've written a great deal about the role of the Holocaust as a turning point, a pivot. You call it a transformative insight in one place; in another you call it a revelation, which is a surprising use of the term. Both of them are "revelations," which you say represent a rebuke, a challenge, and an opportunity to heal relations between Jews and Christians.

You seem to be arguing that God withheld involvement in the Holocaust, didn't soften what happened to the Jews in any way, and allowed the Holocaust to unfold as an object lesson in the failure of humans to uphold the human side of the covenantal relationship. You say that human freedom had become unbridled in a demonic way, and that the Holocaust was the ultimate expression of that.

A lot of Jews and Christian might find that a disturbing idea.

There is no explanation for the Holocaust, and I remain deeply troubled, in fact, angry about God and with God for not intervening. I want you to understand that that first statement governs everything else I'm about to say. The second thing I want to say is: this is, to me, the revolutionary theological implication as I reflect on the Holocaust: There is no explanation.

I came to conclude that in the covenant with Israel, God self-limits, to use a kabbalistic term, and He repeatedly self-limits, as humans are called to greater and greater responsibility. Only self-limit can explain to me why God did not intervene; if there were ever a time when God was going to intervene, this was the time. And since it didn't happen, either you think God doesn't care, or there is no God, or God is dead, à la [Jewish theologian Richard] Rubenstein, or you claim, as I believe, that this is a further, radical expression of acceptance of human freedom and God's self-limitation. Humans have the freedom, and now they have the technology, to kill not just all the Jews but everybody. And God will not intervene to stop them. God will instruct them not to do this, God will judge them, God will rebuke them, but God will not miraculously intervene.

And to me, that in turn suggests in the history of the covenant, there is a greater and greater maturity. And in retrospect, I feel this was the goal--a way of humans to become more and more responsible for the covenant, including for what were historically projected as miracles--God will send the Messiah, the Redeemer, human partnership with God will accomplish this.

This is again the explosively positive upside of modern and post-modern culture. For example, if the prophetic dream is to overcome sickness, there's been incredible breakthroughs in human medicine. Done properly, in partnership with God, these could be victories for life over death, in messianic terms.

So to come back to the Holocaust, what the Holocaust showed is what happened when humans gained total power: they turned demonic, and they turned into killers. When humans try to become idols in themselves, think they're gods--that's what Hitler was about, absolute authority, total control, religious and spiritual as well as political--they turn into idols. Idolatry is the religion of death. That's what happened in the Holocaust.

It's shocking on many levels. It certainly challenges traditional Judaism, including my own, but I think it forces us in a positive way, if we respond positively, to interpret it not that God has abandoned us--because I think that God suffered every bit as bitterly and as totally as Jews in the camps, infinitely more so because God has infinite consciousness. The suffering of every Jew and every person is multiplied in the divine experience.

So it's not that God didn't care, not that God didn't suffer. [In my book] I said that I held back from saying that God suffers, because I was so busy saying we're not Christians. Of course, I came to realize that that's foolish. It's foolish because it's a great, classic Jewish

idea, and it's foolish because the need to say "I'm not Christian" prevents you from saying what you should have said in the first place.

So if God suffered, why didn't God stop it? My answer is that God was calling upon humans to stop it, and the truth is that the Holocaust could have been stopped 10 times. At the beginning of Hitler's career, when the war broke out, during the war. So that's my point. Humans are called to take full responsibility, not only to stop the Holocaust but to build and complete the redemption that both Judaism and Christianity are about.

To make existence possible--to use a kabbalistic image now--God had to self-limit to make room for existence. And God does so out of love. There's a magnificent Talmudic passage that says, "If the person is worthy, the Torah is a potion of life," it's a healing medicine. If the person is unworthy, and uses it wrong, it's poison. And another Talmudic comment, the line between heaven and hell is as thin as a hair's breadth.

[The founding of Israel] was a messianic moment. They responded to death [the Holocaust] with a whole new outburst of life. Having said that, if you push that insight too far, you end up [in contemporary Israel] with messianic movements that are not politically responsible. They want to ignore world opinion and the right of Palestinians to have their own state. Why? Because they believe that God is on their side or the Messiah will come and prove that you are right? That's irresponsible, given the lesson of the Holocaust, which was that we are not going to get a miraculous Messiah, and God on our side didn't stop the SS. But they are the minority and are treated as beyond the pale.

In the book, I say that everything I've had to say about Judaism and Christianity coming together can apply to Islam as well, but, for the moment, it is much more complicated, partly because of the Israel/Arab conflict, but partly because of where Islam is right now, in a pre-modern, absolutist phase. Islam has to go through the same process that Christianity and Judaism have, which includes modernization and pluralism, if it's to avoid being dragged into the extremist form.

Does Jewish extremism in Israel stem from their interpretation of the covenantal relationship? Most of the religious settlers in Israel say that they cannot relinquish one inch of land because it's part of the covenantal bargain between God and the people of Israel.

It's all about limits. The covenant is about limits--God had to self-limit. God, pure and simple, is death. In Exodus, it says Moses asked to see God, and God replied humans cannot see me and live. Pure, unmediated divine is so overpowering that nothing could exist in its presence. To make existence possible, God had to self-limit.

So the messianic insight is profound. But taken without limits, it becomes pathological and destructive. If you believe that God is on your side, you're a partner with God, that is healing. If you believe that you literally, and no one else, can prescribe the unlimited way that God has given you the authority to take every last inch and make no room for the life

of the Palestinians, then you've taken something healthy and healing and turned it poisonous.

There's a magnificent Talmudic passage that says, if a person is worthy, the Torah is a potion of life, a healing medicine. If the person is unworthy, and uses it wrong, it's poison. If you push all the truths of Christianity and of Islam and of Judaism correctly, they contribute to a better world. If you push it too far--that Muslims have a right to kill unbelievers, or ultra-Orthodox Jews who say they have a right to abuse Palestinians, for example--it becomes poison.

Religions should now see themselves as obligated to take the effort to take the risks to exercise self-criticism, self-control, and together they can make it a better world. These are not just theological comments or arguments: they have immense practical, political consequences.