

FOUNDATIONS



# Foundations for a Thoughtful Judaism Faith

SOURCES



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## CLASS 3 FAITH AND ETHICS

### Source 1



Genesis (Bereshit) 9:6

שִׁפְךָ דַם הָאָדָם בְּאָדָם דָּמוֹ יִשְׁפָּךְ כִּי בְצַלְמֵ אֱ-לֹהִים עָשָׂה אֶת הָאָדָם.

One who sheds a person's blood, by human being shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God made the human being.

### Source 2



Anat Biletzki, "The Sacred and the Humane," *The New York Times*, July 7, 2011

One deep philosophical issue that invigorates debates in human rights is the question of their foundation and justification, the question "where do human rights come from, and what grounds them?" There are two essentially different approaches to answering that question — the religious way and the secular, or philosophical, way...A good representative of the first camp is the religious historian and educator R. H. Tawney: "The essence of all morality is this: to believe that every human being is of infinite importance, and therefore that no consideration of expediency can justify the oppression of one by another. But to believe this it is necessary to believe in God."

The second, non-religious grounding of human rights, is harder to give voice to by a single representative since there is a multiplicity of distinct, non-religious groundings of human rights...

What difference does it make? Beyond the theoretical discussions on human rights, — What grounds them *theoretically*? What justifies them *theoretically*? What legal implications do they carry *theoretically*? — there is the "so what?" question. Why do we care, or why should we care, if the practice of human rights is born of religious or secular motivation?...

I think it does. I dare say that religion, even when indirectly in the service of human rights, is not really working for human rights. Although there is recognition of the human as sacred, it is not the concept of *rights* that propels the religious person. For him, the human status of



sacredness draws from divine creation and directive, from man (and woman) having been created in God's image, and therefore has nothing to do with a human right...

The problem arises not when we act together, but rather when we don't. Or put differently, when we act together, the problem stays in the realm of theory, providing fodder for the philosophical game of human rights. It is when we disagree — about abortion, about capital punishment, about settling occupied lands — that the religious authority must vacate the arena of human rights. This is not to say that all religious people hold the same views on these issues or that secular persons are always in agreement (although opinion polls, for whatever they are worth, point to far more unity of thought on the religious side). It is rather that an internal, secular debate on issues that pertain to human rights is structurally and essentially different from the debate between the two camps. In the latter, the authority that is conscripted to “command” us on the religious side is God, while on the secular side it is the human, with her claim to reason, her proclivity to emotion, and her capacity for compassion. In a sense, that is no commandment at all. It is a turn to the human, and a (perhaps axiomatic, perhaps even dogmatic) posit of human dignity, that turns the engine of human rights, leaving us open to discussion, disagreement, and questioning without ever deserting that first posit. The parallel turn to God puts our actions under his command; if he commands a violation of human rights, then so be it. There is no meaning to human *rights* under divine commandment. A deep acceptance of divine authority — and that is what true religion demands — entails a renunciation of human rights if God so wills. Had God's angel failed to call out — “Abraham! Abraham!” — Abraham would have slain Isaac...

And, you may say, what about the wonder of religion, the majestic awe that encompasses the religious person when confronted by a spiritual revelation that motivates and “regulates for in all his life”? (This was Ludwig Wittgenstein's “definition” of religion.) Can secular morals live up to that type of enchantment? Is there not something about secular rationalism that conduces rather to skepticism, fallibility and indifference than to the kind of awesome respect for the sacred human being that comes with religion? Here I have no choice than to turn to dogmatism — call it Kantian dogmatism: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” For some, the physics that runs the natural world and the ethics that provide for our moral sense are seen to be more ordinary than religious experience. I, on the other hand, can think of nothing more awe inspiring than humanity and its fragility and its resilience.



### Source 3

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Hazon Ish, Faith and Belief (Emunah U'bitachon) 3:1

וההלכה היא המכרעת את האסור ואת המותר של תורת המוסר

Jewish law is the decisive factor in deciding what is moral and what is immoral.

### Source 4

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Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition* (1994), 177-78

Perhaps this is the only legitimate response one can make at this time: a series of tentative remarks. If feminism is a revolution, as I believe it is, and Judaism is and always has been the rock-bottom source of a Jew's values, thoughts, feelings, actions, mores, laws, and loves — how else can one respond to and be part of that turbulent encounter but with a stammer, one step forward and half a step backward. I envy those who can say, "This is Halakhah (=Jewish law). That's it!" Or, "These are the absolute new truths, and nothing less will do!" I envy, but I also suspect, their unexamined complacency. I suspect that their fear is even greater than mine; therefore, they must keep the lid on even tighter and show no ambivalence, no caution, and no confusion.

So, for me, despite the turbulence, or maybe because of it, it has not been all bad. I have had some very good feelings in the course of doing this work. The best of these has been a sense of being able to approach the sources without intimidation. The fact that I can think about the traditional sources without knowing them exhaustively, that I can bring to bear my own interpretative keys without diminishing the divinity and authority of the Halakhah and tradition — this has been a revelation for me. So, too, the experience, which all women alive today share, of stretching ourselves, our minds, our talents, our sights. Transition women, like myself, are taking everything less for granted and finding each step more exhilarating.



## Source 5

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Donniel Hartman, *Putting God Second: How to Save Religion from Itself* (2016), 13-15

The truth is that monotheistic religion is neither perfectly good — and thus its failures the exclusive result of human weakness — nor perfectly evil, poisoning the character of all who adopt it with a crippling spiritual disease. The central argument of this book is that religion’s (and religions’) spotty moral track record cannot be written off to either a core corruption in human nature or an inherently corrupt scripture. Rather it is my contention that a life of faith, while obligating moral sensitivity, also very often activates a critical flaw that supports and encourages immoral impulses. These impulses, given free rein to flourish under the cloak of religious piety, undermine the ultimate moral agendas of religions and the types of communities and societies they aspire to build. The argument of this book is that this critical flaw, when recognized, can be overcome.

This frequently overlooked phenomenon that accounts for the moral underachievement of our monotheistic traditions is what I term religion’s “autoimmune disease” — a disease in which the body’s immune system, which is designed to fight off external threats, instead attacks and destroys the body’s own healthy cells and tissues. This diagnosis is meant to help conceptualize the dynamics through which religions so often undermine their own deepest values and attack their professed goals. While God obligates the good and calls us into its service, God simultaneously and inadvertently makes us morally blind.

The nature of monotheism’s autoimmune disease is that God’s presence, and the human religious desire to live in relationship with God, often distracts religion’s adherents from their traditions’ core moral truths. Such a presence can so consume our field of vision that we see nothing other than God (a recipe for ethical bankruptcy); can lead to claims of chosenness that encourage self-aggrandizing reflexivity (transforming us into people who see only ourselves); or can cause us to see scripture as morally perfect, despite the failures embedded within it (thereby sanctifying the morally profane).

Ultimately, I believe that religion’s record of moral mediocrity will persist as long as communities of faith fail to recognize the ways in which our faith itself is working against us. In other words, only when we are able to discern, within ourselves and our traditions, the symptoms of religion’s autoimmune diseases, will we be able to begin developing remedies that enable religion to heal itself and reclaim its noble aspirations.



## For Further Reading

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Dara Horn, "The Rescuer," *Tablet Magazine*, January 17, 2012

One balmy winter morning last year, I took myself on a tour of homes in the Hollywood Hills, cruising along palm-lined streets called Napoli Drive, Amalfi Drive, Monaco Drive, and other names evoking the opposite side of the planet. I was the only tourist. The cartoonish palm trees among the European names reinforced my existential fear of Los Angeles, a city that lacks so many of the things I was raised to consider normal — things like seasons, or aging, or people who reserve the word "historic" for events that occurred prior to 1982. It is a place without markers of mortality, which made my tour particularly complicated. Instead of driving by the homes of Britney Spears and Charlie Sheen, I was looking to solve the mystery of a group of people saved from the Holocaust by an American named Varian Fry.

Between 1940 and 1941, working out of a hotel room and later a small office in the French port city of Marseille, Varian Fry rescued hundreds of artists, writers, musicians, composers, scientists, philosophers, intellectuals, and their families from the Nazis, taking enormous personal risks to bring them to the United States. Fry was one of the only American "righteous Gentiles," a man who voluntarily risked everything to save others, with no personal connection to those he saved. At the age of 32, Fry had volunteered to go to France on behalf of the Emergency Rescue Committee, an ad hoc group of American intellectuals formed in 1940 for the purpose of distributing emergency American visas to endangered European artists and thinkers. The U.S. Department of State, which initially supported the committee's mission, slowly turned against it in favor of its supposed allies in the "unoccupied" pro-Nazi French government — to the point of arranging for Fry's arrest and expulsion from France in 1941. During Fry's 13 months in Marseille, he managed to rescue 2,000 people, including a hand-picked list of the brightest stars of European culture — Hannah Arendt, Marcel Duchamp, Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and André Breton, to name a few. Until recently, I had never heard of Fry, even though it is arguably because of him — and because of his equally brave colleagues, including several other non-Jewish Americans — that these artists and intellectuals not only survived but reshaped the culture of America. But now I was driving through Los Angeles to see the former homes of some of these rescued luminaries — and to meet a filmmaker who is one of the few living Americans who has heard of Varian Fry.

"We pay tribute to the righteous in order to ignore them. There have been no high-caliber books written about the righteous, no rigorous, critical studies of what made these people do



what they did.” This is what I was told by Pierre Sauvage, a filmmaker who has spent much of the past 14 years working on a documentary about Varian Fry. Bearded and bespectacled in a red polo shirt and looking less like a French cineaste than an American dad who had just dropped his daughter off at college, Sauvage is convinced that the stories of Holocaust rescuers like Fry should be not merely inspirational, but instructional — that by studying these exceptional people, we can learn to be more like them. It’s a surprisingly lonely point of view. In 1984, Sauvage helped organize an international conference on the righteous, chaired by Elie Wiesel. “We brought all these righteous Gentiles to Washington,” Sauvage recalled. “In the breaks between sessions, the righteous Gentiles were standing around being ignored by the scholars. No one spoke to them, no one engaged them. How can scholars not be fascinated by these people?”

Sauvage is the director (and proprietor) of the Varian Fry Institute, a nonprofit archive of “Fryana,” as he calls it. On a warm winter morning in Los Angeles, he welcomed me to the “institute,” which turned out to be a small office with floor-to-ceiling shelves of binders that revealed an obsession bordering on mania. Sauvage’s collection of Fryana included everything from copies of Fry’s letters to textbooks Fry wrote for a public-affairs think tank to a poem he composed in French not long before his death. But most of the Fryana was stored on computers containing video files of what was easily several months of Sauvage’s filmed interviews with nearly every person who ever worked with, talked to, knew of, or breathed near Varian Fry.

Sauvage’s fascination with rescuers comes in part because he owes his life to them. He was born in 1944 in Le Chambon, France, a Huguenot village in the south central part of the country in which the entire town, following the leadership of its Protestant clergy, formed a silent “conspiracy of goodness,” as Sauvage has called it, to shelter Jews from the Nazis. Sauvage’s parents were among the thousands of Jews hidden by the righteous of Le Chambon. His 1989 film *Weapons of the Spirit* is a documentary about the village; it has become an educational staple that I watched in my high-school French class. Sauvage’s parents went to Le Chambon, he later discovered, after being rejected for rescue by Varian Fry.

Fry was honored by Yad Vashem in 1997, 30 years after his death, as one of the Righteous Among the Nations; there is also a street named after him in his hometown of Ridgewood, N.J., not far from where I live. But to Sauvage, this kind of recognition is meaningless when we make no attempt to learn what motivated people like Fry. “Many years ago in New York, I read about a guy who had fallen onto the subway tracks, and another man had jumped down to rescue



him,” Sauvage told me. “When he was asked why he did it, he said, ‘What else could I do? There was a train coming.’ For most people, that would be the reason *not* to do it. But this man’s response was automatic. Fiction and drama have given us a distorted sense of how rescuers think. Writers need a narrative arc, so they show these people wrestling with themselves, agonizing over what to do. But rescuers actually don’t hesitate or agonize. They immediately recognize what the situation calls for. When they say that what they did was no big deal, we think they are being modest. They aren’t. They genuinely experienced it as no big deal.”

From his research in Le Chambon, Sauvage developed his own theory about the righteous: that they are happy, secure people with a profound awareness of who they are. “I’ve never met an unhappy rescuer,” he claimed. “These are people who are rooted in a clear sense of identity — who they are, what they love, what they hate, what they value — that gives them a footing to assess a situation.” He described the inspiration the people of Le Chambon drew from their Protestant history and faith. Then he began showing me his interviews with Fry’s colleagues, introducing me posthumously to several exceedingly intelligent, colorful, and sincere Americans. All of them did indeed seem like happy people, with a deep sense of who they were.

The only person missing from his footage is Varian Fry.

I’ve long been uncomfortable with stories of Holocaust rescue, not least because of the painful fact that they are statistically insignificant — as are, for that matter, stories of Holocaust survival. But for me, the unease of these stories runs deeper. When I was 23 and just beginning my doctoral work in Yiddish, I barely understood the world I was entering. It is a very distant world from what we are taught to assume in American culture, where happy endings are so expected that even our stories of the Holocaust somehow have to be redemptive. In Holocaust literature written in Yiddish, the language of the culture that was successfully destroyed, one doesn’t find many musings on the kindness of strangers, because there actually wasn’t much of that. Instead one finds cries of anguish, rage, and, yes, vengeance. Stories about Christian rescuers are far more palatable to American audiences, because while they have the imprimatur of true stories, they also conveniently follow the familiar arc of fiction. The overwhelming reality of the unavenged murder of innocents — the reality one finds recorded in the culture that was actually destroyed — doesn’t play as well in Hollywood.

But unlike the humble peasants of Le Chambon, Varian Fry felt oddly familiar to me. Not just because he was young and American, but because he was very much the kind of young American I know best. Like me, he grew up in a commuter suburb in northern New Jersey;



he graduated from Harvard in 1931, 68 years before I did. In photographs, he looks a lot like the guys I went to college with: thin, awkward, but handsome in a dorky way, his then-stylish glasses and carefully knotted ties a failed but endearing attempt at coolness. His personal letters, which I read in Columbia University's Rare Book Room, are well-written and irreverent in a tone I recognize from my college friends — full of witty references to nerdy things ranging from the Aeneid (“I was surprised to find so many more/ had joined us, ready for exile ...”) to Gilbert and Sullivan (“I am never disappointed in them [the rescued artists] — what never? Well, *hardly* ever!”). If he hadn't been dead for more than 40 years, I might have dated him.

What felt creepily familiar about him, too, were his motivations. ...