

## Review Essay

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# *A Religiously Sensitive Jewish Philosophical Theology*

EZRA BICK, *In His Mercy: Understanding the Thirteen Midot*

Translated by David Silverberg

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Jewish theology has been something of a rarity in Modern Orthodox circles for the past several decades. Of course there have been many scholarly works analyzing and evaluating the theologies of other thinkers or historical movements, but there have been few attempts at constructive theology, attempts, that is, to develop and proffer some view about God's nature or His relationship to the world. R. Ezra Bick's rich and ambitious work is a notable and welcome exception.

### I.

Organized as an analysis of just a few well-known verses in the *Torah* (Exodus 34:6-7), in which God reveals His so-called thirteen attributes of mercy, the book's stated aims and subject matter are considerably broader.<sup>1</sup>

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1. In the book, the thirteen attributes are referred to as the "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy" (capitalized) and each mention of an attribute is capitalized. I will be using lower case, except when citing the book.

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R. Bick makes clear at the outset that he aims not only to analyze those few verses, or even just to sketch a theology rooted in the thirteen *middot* and *Hazal's* interpretation of them, but rather to understand the *middot* as forming one of the most sublime *prayers* in all of Jewish liturgy. Thus, the central questions that occupy the book are these: How is the penitent who is “praying the thirteen *middot*” supposed to understand the words? How should he or she be transformed by uttering them? And, perhaps a logically prior question, in what way are they the text of a prayer at all?

Naturally enough, answering those questions still consists, in large part, in performing the twin tasks of exegesis and constructive theology. Exodus 34:6-7 is, after all, a *locus classicus* in *Tanakh* for any systematic discussion of what God is like or how He relates to the natural world. When the Psalmist speaks of God’s informing Moses of “His ways,” he adverts not to the verses immediately following Exodus 33:13, in which Moses asks God to show him His ways, but to these verses.<sup>2</sup> Not for naught did Maimonides devote nearly an entire chapter of his *Guide for the Perplexed*, located in the heart of his programmatic discussion of religious language, to a reconciliation of these verses with Maimonides’ conception of God as lacking emotions and psychological states.<sup>3</sup> No Jewish theology, in the narrow and etymologically faithful sense of “theology,” can reasonably ignore the *middot*. Conversely, one could hardly offer an interpretation of the *middot* that carries no theological implications. R. Bick’s work is no exception. It is shot through with theological claims, dealing with topics as diverse as the manifestation of God’s Kingship in the natural world, God’s relation to evil, God’s identification with the suffering of human beings, and God’s responsibility for sin, to list just a representative sample.

At the same time, the fact that its theology is strongly tethered to God’s self-disclosure and that it is ever mindful of the *middot's* role in penitence and liturgy allows this work to sidestep many of the religious pitfalls that often accompany theological reflection. The pitfalls are numerous and serious. For one thing, the adverse religious consequences of error are presumably considerably greater in theology than in an ordinary intellectual endeavor. One need not go as far as Maimonides—for whom theological error alone is tantamount to a denial of God’s existence and outranks even idolatry in its gravity—to think that one’s relationship with God is compromised if one develops a systematic theology that is far wide of the mark.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Ps. 103:7-8.

3. *Guide for the Perplexed* 1:54.

4. See *Guide* 1:36 and 1:60, and Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Boston, 1998), chap. 4.

Moreover, attitudinal dangers attend sustained theological reflection, ones that threaten to undermine a proper creature-Creator relationship even in the absence of any doxastic missteps. The philosopher Alvin Plantinga once ruefully remarked that contemporary discussions of philosophical theology often remind him of someone sitting next to his elderly mother and going on about whether she's "all there," as though she were not there. Indeed, excessive reference to someone in third-person can have that effect! And, even if one manages not to ignore God while talking about Him, one encounters the equally problematic prospect of inadvertently upending, or even just altering, the roles of Master and servant. While it does not follow from the fact that a servant has probed into the character of his Master that the servant is in fact any less indentured, such probing—especially with an ambition of comprehensiveness—can easily engender within the servant an *attitude* of hubris, the feeling that the yawning gap has been closed ever so slightly.<sup>5</sup> "Now I have penetrated his inner workings; I understand what makes him tick," haughtily mutters the servant.

The problem here is not an epistemological or linguistic barrier created by God's transcendence, so often emphasized by latter-day Maimonideans and Kantians, but a religious, perhaps even moral imperative to maintain it. As the philosopher Merold Westphal puts it in explicating Heidegger's similar critique of the dominant Christian theological tradition, "Heidegger's objections to the calculative-representational thinking that places not only the world but God as well at our disposal are more Kierkegaardian than Kantian. What we lack is not so much the power to pull off this project (though, of course, we do) as the right to attempt it."<sup>6</sup>

Confronted with these pitfalls a religious Jew might sensibly abandon the whole enterprise of theology, choosing to invest religious and intellectual energy elsewhere. Usually, the epistemic aim of avoiding falsehood is balanced by the epistemic aim of knowing (or understanding or believing) the truth, so that universal skepticism or agnosticism is not obviously the most epistemically virtuous option. But when it comes to theology, one might reasonably find the former aim to predominate, because the risks involved in error are simply too great.<sup>7</sup> Better no theology than a

5. See Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York, NY, 2001), chap. 1, and Michael Rea's helpful discussion of Westphal's critique in *Analytic Theology*, ed. Michael Rea and Oliver Crisp (Oxford, 2011), 9-11.

6. Westphal, 12.

7. On the issue of the appropriate "balance," in general, between avoiding falsehood and pursuing truth (whatever the latter involves exactly), see William James, "The Will to Believe," sec. 7, where he criticizes W. K. Clifford for his nearly obsessive preference for the former. See also Richard Feldman, "Clifford's Principle and James's Options," *Social Epistemology* 20 (2006): 19-33, for helpful discussion.

wrong one! And even if understanding others is, in general, a worthwhile aim and important for the cultivation of personal relationships, it can too easily be detrimental to the radically asymmetric relationship in which we human beings stand to God. The upshot for many: better to leave theology to others.

This is an understandable reaction. Indeed, it has been a historically influential one.<sup>8</sup> After voicing something very much like Heidegger's and Westphal's concerns, Michael Wyschogrod adds:

This is Jewish intelligence as reflected in Talmudic rationality. The Rabbis of the Talmud, too, could have asked whether something was good because God commanded it or whether God commanded it because it was good. They did not ask this question because *obedient intelligence* has a sense of limit, of the vanity involved in hurling questions at the limits, the very limits that make the asking of questions possible. Jewish intelligence therefore applies itself to delineating concrete moral and ritual issues, using biblical legislation as its point of departure... As the complexity of its reasoning inside the bounds it sets for itself increases, its silence about questions directed at the bounds becomes ever louder and *a witness to the sovereignty of Israel's dialogue partner*. . . .<sup>9</sup> (emphasis mine)

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8. Perhaps this goes part of the way to explaining the fact of which I made mention at the beginning, namely the paucity of theological writing—where “theology” is construed narrowly and scholarly work on the theology of *others* is discounted—that has emerged from the Modern Orthodox community in recent decades, at least relative to what has emerged from the *haredi* community. See David Shatz, “Remembering Marvin Fox: One Man’s Legacy to Jewish Thought,” *Tradition* 36:1 (2002), 59–88, which makes the broader point that the last few decades have seen a precipitous decline in the amount of serious *mahashavah*—where that includes, but is not limited to, theology proper—coming from centrist Orthodox Jewish circles in America.

There are probably other contributing factors, however. For one, Modern Orthodox thinkers may resonate more with, or be influenced by, the prevalent contemporary attitude that sees something *philosophically* wrong with theology, usually on vaguely Kantian grounds. Furthermore, Yoel Finkelman has argued that much of contemporary *haredi* theology, at least of the popular variety, is geared toward proving a certain univocal theological approach, or, in the case of literature designed for internal consumption, toward creating a wholesale theological package to be accepted on faith. Modern Orthodox thinkers, he notes, do not share those aims. See Yoel Finkelman, *Strictly Kosher Reading: Popular Literature and the Condition of Contemporary Orthodoxy* (Boston, 2011), 123–58. It might just be easier to produce theological works with the *haredi* aim in mind. Thus, at least the discrepancy between Modern Orthodox and *haredi* circles might be a function, in part, of the differences in the perceived aims of theological writing.

Shatz (*ibid.*), who focuses not on the contrast to *haredi* literature as much as the contrast between the desertion of theology and philosophy and the embrace of fields such as history and Jewish studies, offers several other noteworthy explanations. But neither Shatz’s explanations nor mine adequately address the fact that as recently as the 60s and 70s, the situation was different.

9. Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God and the People Israel* (New York, 1996), 8. I

But, of course, this has not been the only historical reaction. The history of Jewish thought, in quarters as diverse as medieval Jewish philosophy, biblical exegesis, Kabbalah, and Hasidism, is filled with thinkers who were not coy about theological speculation. Wyschogrod himself is, in fact, such a thinker. And even with respect to “Talmudic rationality,” Wyschogrod’s description is something of a caricature.<sup>10</sup>

In any case, the reaction seems a bit hasty. First, it is far from obvious that one who lives a genuinely religious life can avoid having *any* theology at all, however unsystematic it might be. It is quite plausible, almost platitudinous, that a religious person will, of necessity, deploy *some* concept of God and possess *some* theological beliefs or stances, even if they are a bit inchoate or largely “negative.” How can one meaningfully pray, or repent, or accept the yoke of Heaven when reciting *keri’at shema* if one has absolutely no conception of God and His relation to the natural world?<sup>11</sup> And if one cannot, then adopting no theology, rather than risking acceptance of a wrong one, is simply not possible for a religious person.

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should note that there seems to be in this passage a confluence or conflation of Heidegger’s objection—that an intelligence that recognizes no sense of limit is not an obedient intelligence and its exercise would constitute a failure to recognize God’s sovereignty—and a Kantian objection—that we are simply powerless to ask certain questions because of epistemic or cognitive limitations that are entailed by the ability to ask any questions at all. 10. Wyschogrod acknowledges that in midrashic literature, “very often we sense philosophical questions in the background,” but he says, “the questions are not raised directly” (9). Granted, it is hard to say what the standards are for “directly raising a question,” but it seems that by any reasonable standard, *Hazal* did directly raise certain theological questions. For example, *Hazal* address the problem of theodicy quite explicitly in various places; see, inter alia, the well-known passage in *Menahot* 29b and *Bereshit Rabbah* (Vilna), *Parashah* 49. Yaakov Elman, “The Suffering of the Righteous in Palestinian and Babylonian Sources,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 90 (1990): 315-39, remarks that “Babylonian sources, on the other hand, *face the question more directly*, and acknowledge that the righteous often do not receive their just deserts; they suggest some mechanisms to account for the phenomenon” (emphasis mine). And as Warren Zev Harvey cogently argues, it is quite plausible that at least some talmudic Rabbis in the land of Israel engaged in *philosophically well-informed* discussion of theology with non-Jewish philosophers, albeit begrudgingly and cynically, as philosophy was at bottom “foreign to their concerns.” See Harvey, “Rabbinic Attitudes toward Philosophy,” in *Open Thou Mine Eyes. . . : Essays on Aggadah and Judaica Presented to Rabbi William G. Braude on His Eightieth Birthday and Dedicated to His Memory*, ed. Herman J. Blumberg et al. (Hoboken, NJ, 1992), 83-101). (My thanks to David Shatz for this reference.)

11. A thinker like Yeshayahu Leibowitz would, presumably, disagree with my assertion and the implication of my rhetorical question. See, for example, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, “The Reading of Shema,” in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, ed. Eliezer Goldman (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 44. But Daniel Statman “Negative Theology and the Meaning of the Commandments in Modern Orthodoxy,” *Tradition* 39 (2005): 58-71, very cogently argues that a *wholly* or *radically* negative theology, such as that of Leibowitz, necessarily empties ritual, and human activity more generally, of any religious meaning.

Second, and crucially, the perils of these investigations can be avoided, at the very least partially, in various well-trodden ways. If one is willing to place limits on one's inquiry, to rest content with understanding the implications of what God Himself has revealed even if it offers no promise of a comprehensive theology, then the concerns about theological error and a religiously inappropriate posture are less pressing. One can hardly be faulted for going astray if one takes God's word about matters of theology, and the prospect of hubris does not much arise. The same holds true to the extent that one is working out the theological commitments inherent in one's worship of God. If one is really praying—standing before God and articulating one's all-too-human needs—or approaching God after sin with a contrite heart, it is, needless to say, hard to forget God or to misjudge one's standing.<sup>12</sup> It is certainly difficult to engage in sustained theological reflection *while* praying, but one can presumably call to mind what it's like to pray, to have that experience before “the mind's eye,” when engaged in theological reflection.<sup>13</sup> One is almost bound to do so if one is trying to work out the theological commitments inherent in divine worship.

The theology of *In His Mercy* is an illustrative case. At no point does the reader—or this reader at any rate—sense any religious presumptuousness or brazenness. And that is not for lack of bold, even if not wholly original, theological claims: that God *needs* human beings (xix-xx); that God *cannot resist* the cries of a penitent, not because of any prior commitment on His part, but because He sees an image of Himself in us (30-31); that God binds the soul of the sinner to Himself and *absorbs* the stain on his soul (90); and that God shares responsibility for a sin because He has indeed played a vital role in its performance (56). What prevents these claims from sounding as brazen as they do when plucked from their original context? In part, it is due to the book's point of departure. God Himself revealed to Moses the thirteen *middot*, and the content of that revelation serves as the primary “datum” for the ensuing discussion. Of course, the whole Torah is a revelation of God, but there is probably no

12. To be sure, a context of worship can exacerbate some of the dangers involved in holding a wrong theology. Worshipping while holding a faulty theology might very well constitute *avodah zarah*—even if merely holding a faulty theology does not—if it is worship of something other than God. See *Guide* 1:60 and Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, chapter 5. Cf. William P. Alston, “Referring to God,” in his *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, 1989), 103-17.

13. Although for Maimonides, “prayer” might simply refer to a particular sort of theological reflection. See *Guide* 3:51 and Ehud Benor, *Worship of the Heart: A Study in Maimonides' Philosophy of Religion* (Binghamton, NY, 1995), chapter 1. According to such a view, it is of course quite simple to pray and engage in theological reflection at the same time.

other passage in the Torah in which God reveals so pointedly that which human beings are to understand about Him. To be sure, ours is not an unmediated encounter with that revelation; it has been filtered through layers of interpretation, not least of which is our author's. But they are interpretations of *God's self-disclosure* all the same—not the straightforward product of rational reflection or even ordinary religious experience—and the book reminds us of this early and often. The reader repeatedly hears the talmudic remark, “if the verse had not been written, it would be impossible to say it,” almost as a refrain.<sup>14</sup> The message is clear: R. Bick would not dare to make these claims but for the fact that it follows from that which God has chosen to reveal.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps more significant than its point of departure is this work's primary aim—to understand the recitation of the thirteen *middot* as a *prayer* and as a tool of *repentance*. As R. Bick notes before the book even begins, “The chief objective of these discussions was to understand *why* we recite the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy in the *Seliḥot* prayer; the secondary goal was to understand each attribute based on the Talmud, *midrashim*, and major commentaries” (ix). This objective is taken up from start to finish. Right at the beginning of the discussion of the first two *middot*, we are given a clear indication that this will not be merely an academic exercise: “However, the precise meaning that we discover for each name adds an additional requirement of intention, not only regarding the meaning of the words, but also in terms of consciousness and awareness. We must comprehend what facets of God's presence we are bringing down into the world” (1). R. Bick reiterates and applies this general point at several turns, including the discussion of the *middot* of *raḥum* and *ḥanun*:

If this is the correct understanding of *Ḥanun*, then it requires special intent as one recites this attribute in prayer. As we have noted, each attribute must be accompanied by an awareness on the part of the worshipper, based upon his role as the “chariot” bearing that divine name. According to the

14. In the Hebrew version of the book, at least, its role as a refrain is acknowledged explicitly (p. 45): לאחור למשפט שמלווה אותנו מאז ההתחלה—אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומרו: —“I will repeat a statement that has accompanied us from the beginning: ‘if the verse had not been written, it would be impossible to say it. . . .’”

15. Moshe Halbertal has argued that in the large majority of cases in talmudic and midrashic literature in which that remark is used, it serves the function of cloaking an innovative theological idea—particularly one that subverts the prevalent image of God's occupying a “senior” position in an asymmetric relationship—under the guise of an authoritative and inevitable conclusion from Scripture. See his “*Imalei Mikra Katuv I Efsar Le-Omro*,” *Tarbiz* 68(1998): 39-60. Be that as it may, that certainly does not seem to be its function in *this* book.

approach proposed here, one who recites the name of *Hanun* must cry out from suffering and torment, presenting before God the suffering in the world in a manner that arouses identification. (34)

Obviously enough, R. Bick takes his theology to have implications for the way a penitent ought to pray. Less obviously, perhaps, his theology is in turn shaped by—or at least understood in the context of—the spiritual life of a tormented and helpless penitent, real or imagined. In this way, a theologically bold claim is prevented from becoming a religiously brazen one. Anyone who takes the thirteen *middot* seriously as a prayer—and R. Bick's reader is assumed to be such a person—is unlikely to be led by his or her theological understanding to any hubris, at least not if he or she is cognizant of the religious condition which ought to give rise to the prayer.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to its point of departure and primary aim, a third significant and related element makes R. Bick's theology religiously "safer"—its use of loose and figurative language.<sup>17</sup> The phrase, "as it were" ("*kivyakhoh*"), is used numerous times to qualify a statement about God, predicates applied to God are often put in scare quotes, and, in general, the use of metaphor, simile, and allegory when speaking of God—a practice that has deep Scriptural and Midrashic roots—is ubiquitous.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to note that R. Bick is not to be aligned with

16. It is true that the book contrasts the emotional state of one reciting the thirteen *middot* with that of a person engaged in ordinary prayer: "The emotional state of one reciting the Thirteen Attributes differs from that of a person in prayer, who falls upon his face and pleads to God. In prayer, the individual feels weak and helpless, broken and crushed. . . . One who reads the Thirteen Attributes, in contrast, prepares himself to serve the role of a chariot for the *Shekhina*. . ." (xxiii). But that is not where the penitent *begins*—he must start with a contrite heart. Moreover, R. Bick continues, "On the one hand, this role expresses the greatness of man. . . . On the other hand, it requires *that the individual is no longer his own; he has entirely devoted himself to serving God* by being His bearer in the world" (*ibid.*, emphasis mine). The feeling that one is an *eved Hashem* is strongly reinforced.

17. To be clear, I do not mean to identify *loose* use of language with *figurative* use of language. One can, for instance, speak loosely without speaking figuratively at all.

18. There is a bit of a difference between the Hebrew version of the book and its English translation as to where one finds clear cases of figurative language or explanations of its use. Scare quotes are employed quite frequently in the English translation, but not nearly so much in the Hebrew version. On the other hand, one finds a clear statement, in the Hebrew version, explaining his usage of "*kivyakhoh*": גם אני בוחר להסתתר מאחורי—*"I too choose to hide behind a wall, built by Tosafot, that protects one from ideas that are too daring, and [hence] to add the word 'kivyakhoh'"* (47), an explanation that is omitted in the English translation. In any case, it is quite clear from even a cursory reading of the Hebrew version that the use of figurative language is not merely an artifact of the English translation.

contemporary self-identifying Maimonideans and other devotees of “negative theology.” These deny, to one degree or other, that we can say anything true and “positive” about God, or more radically even, that we can say anything true about God, period.<sup>19</sup> R. Bick clearly thinks, by contrast, that we can speak truly of God, even when saying things that are “positive,” however exactly we are to understand the positive/negative distinction in this context. It is not even that *nothing* can be both *strictly and literally* true and about God; there is no obstacle to truly saying, for example, “God created the world” and meaning it literally.<sup>20</sup> It is just that loose or figurative language is *sometimes* necessary, particularly when the claim would otherwise be too audacious.

For example, it simply cannot be strictly and literally true, R. Bick thinks, that God identifies with the torment of the sinner because He sees in him His own image, or that as a result of that identification He erupts in rage. R. Bick utters and writes sentences that appear to express those claims because he has no *other* way to say what he does want to express. Such statements involve an ineliminable manner of speaking, but they must be understood only as *kivyakhol*, merely “as it were.”<sup>21</sup> In using that term, he has blunted the force of an otherwise shocking image, and at the same time, he has replaced direct and precise descriptions of God with oblique and open-ended ones. Again, the attitudinal threat has been at least partly averted.

## II.

However, the consistent use of such language presents a difficulty of its own. There is no question that to a significant extent, the book is a work of *philosophical* theology, rather than just theology. One clear indication

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19. See Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Emunah, Historiyyah va-Arakhim* (Jerusalem, 1982), and Eliezer Goldman’s “Introduction,” in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, xiv. On some of the difficulties facing such a position, see Statman, “Negative Theology.”

20. Some liberal theologians have indeed denied that anything can be both strictly and literally true and about God. See William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language*, 17 and 39-40.

21. Michael Fishbane, *Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1992), claims that in midrashic literature, the word “*kivyakhol*” does not indicate a figurative usage at all, but rather serves the function of conditionalizing, i.e., “indicating that *if* one reads the biblical passage midrashically, such and so is the sense which can be construed” (27). But to echo what I said in n. 15, whether or not Fishbane is correct about midrashic uses, R. Bick certainly uses “*kivyakhol*” to indicate a figurative, and even hedged, usage.

is the range of topics it treats. God's relation to the human perpetration of sin (ch. 5), the relation between free will and divine providence more generally (ch. 6), the relation between God and time (chs. 6 and 7), and the purpose of creation (Introduction, chs. 1 and 2)—all have received philosophical treatment, from the medieval period until today. In each of these cases, the work of other philosophers, all of them medieval and Jewish, is brought to bear on the book's discussion. Moreover, and more importantly, the book's approach is often undeniably philosophical, even when taking on issues that are not traditionally philosophical.

It is very difficult to give a clear statement of what the, or even a, "philosophical approach" is—unlike, say, the scientific method, which we all learn to formulate in grade school—but at least two activities seem characteristic of philosophy. Often, philosophers start with some claim or claims and try to systematically draw out its (or their) non-trivial *consequences* or *implications*. This is what philosophers do when they offer an argument, for example. Sometimes they do so in the service of recommending the conclusion for adoption, other times in the service of reducing one of the initial claims to absurdity, and sometimes for neither of those ends, but in any case, they are engaged in the activity of systematically exposing interesting *logical* relations between claims.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps equally as often, philosophers start with some facts and try to offer a deeper (in some sense of "deep") *explanation* or *account* of them, of *why* they obtain. This, too, can be done in the service of different ends. Sometimes they do so in the service of recommending the explanation for adoption—a kind of "inference to the best explanation"—and sometimes they do so to gain a deeper theoretical understanding of the explananda (i.e., the facts to be explained), but in either case, they are engaged in the activity of exposing *explanatory* relations.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, these activities do not uniquely characterize philosophy. Mathematicians are certainly in the business of systematically investigating logical relations and physicists and historians are in the business of discovering comprehensive explanations. But when restricted to

22. Note that the activity of exposing logical relations is broader than the activity of drawing out a claim's logical consequences. When one shows, for example, that certain claims are *logically independent* of one another, one has thereby exposed a certain logical relation between claims, but has not drawn out a claim's logical consequences: one has merely shown something *not to be* a logical consequence of a certain claim.

23. Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Boston, 1983), 8-18, advocates for philosophers to shift their emphasis to the activity of explanation, particularly in order to gain understanding or illumination.

claims or issues of the right *sort*—epistemological, ethical, metaphysical, theological, political, etc.—these activities constitute a philosophical approach to the issue in question. In any case, what matters for present purposes is not the relatively uninteresting question of what counts as philosophy but the fact that the book clearly engages in both of these activities, and often in tandem.

For instance, the attribute signified by “*el*” is understood to be *strength*. Why is that one of the attributes of mercy? A first pass at an answer is that it sometimes requires strength to be merciful. But this in turn calls for explanation. *Why* does mercy sometimes require strength for its implementation? More specifically, why does God, when acting mercifully toward a penitent, need to be strong? The book proposes several layers of explanation for this curious fact, but the common thread is this: altering or overcoming a “natural” state of affairs requires strength. God, in order to show mercy to a sinner, has to overcome both the natural course of creation—the way it was initially designed to work—and His own attribute of justice. He even has to overcome His *goodness*, since He will be, in effect, sustaining evil, at least for a time. And so, as a straightforward *consequence* of these facts, God displays strength by being merciful toward a penitent.

To take another example, in discussing the attribute of *hanun*, R. Bick, citing *Tosafot* (*Rosh Hashanah* 17b), explains that God cannot resist the cry of the penitent, even if the penitent is wholly undeserving, because He cannot bear to see him suffering. It torments Him. But why? Why can’t God bear to see him suffering? The penitent in question—as per the suggestion of the book—is wholly undeserving, not only by the standards of justice, but even by the ordinary standards of compassion! R. Bick proposes a far-reaching and daring explanation, to which I have already alluded several times: God sees Himself in every human being. If God sees a penitent suffering, He sees Himself suffering, from which it simply *follows* that God is tormented when He sees us suffering.<sup>24</sup>

In both of these cases—as throughout the book—explanatory and logical relations are pursued systematically and methodically. The book seems, then, to be a clear instance of philosophical theology. That is, it

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24. This in turn has an important implication. A prominent theme in midrashic and talmudic literature is God’s suffering along with the Jewish People; whenever they suffer, God suffers with them. See, inter alia, *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael, Parashat Bo, Massekhta de-Pisha, Parashah* 14; *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael, Parashat Beshalah, Massekhta de-Amalek, Parashah* 2; and *Midrash Tehillim* (Buber), *mizmor* 27. However, R. Bick’s claim would have the wider implication that God suffers with *all* human beings who suffer.

does so until we notice all the aforementioned uses of “*kiviyakhol*,” scare quotes, and metaphor. That is certainly not standard fare for contemporary philosophical theology, at least within Anglo-American (or so-called “analytic”) circles. One of the hallmarks of contemporary philosophical theology, and analytic philosophy more broadly, is an insistence on speaking strictly and, wherever possible, literally in the course of philosophizing.<sup>25</sup> Of course, eliminating all loose and figurative talk would make for exceedingly dry and unimaginative writing, so philosophers will often pepper their writing with imagery and figures of speech. But almost invariably, they go on to tell the reader what they mean, or it is supposed to be obvious what they mean, *strictly and literally*.

But, one might wonder: is this mere prejudice on their part, perhaps due to the pernicious influence of logical positivism and its outlandishly stringent criteria for meaningfulness? Why shouldn't a deep thinker like R. Bick do philosophical theology without abiding by the strictures of analytic philosophers, so long as he is careful to acknowledge what is merely loose and figurative and what is strict and literal?

Well, first, if it is a prejudice, it is a very old one. It certainly predates logical positivism, and even predates Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, and the birth of analytic philosophy. Hobbes and Locke were both quite adamant that the use of figurative speech is detrimental to proper philosophy.<sup>26</sup> Hobbes even pins part of the blame for the absurdities into which philosophers frequently fall on “the use of metaphors, tropes, and other rhetorical figures, instead of words proper.” Of course, the fact that the attitude is as old as Locke and Hobbes does not preclude it from being mere prejudice, but it should lead us to question facile explanations of its contemporary dominance.<sup>27</sup>

Second, a reason for the stern attitude is not so hard to find.<sup>28</sup> Consider a case in which an individual uses figurative language to express some

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25. See Rea, *Analytic Theology*, 5. Note that it is not that the practitioners of philosophical theology *always* try to express their theological views in literal terms; many of them belong to rich religious traditions, which, like traditional Judaism, are full of figurative theological discourse and liturgy. Their attempts at eliminating non-literal claims are restricted to the philosophical domain.

26. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford, 1909), 36 (part 1, chapter 5) and John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (ed. P. H. Nidditch) (Oxford, 1979), 508 (book 3, chapter 10, section 34).

27. Other philosophers would object further that it is a naïve attitude, since pretty much all of our thinking and talking is thoroughly metaphorical, some “worn-out” and some fresher. See Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Falsity in Their Ultramoral Sense,” in vol. 2 of his *Collected Works*, ed. Oscar Levy (London and Edinburgh, 1911), 171-92.

28. The following argument is a close adaptation of William P. Alston's in his “Irreducible Metaphors in Theology,” reprinted in *Divine Nature and Human Language*, 17-38.

claim about God. On one account of what he is doing, he is presenting to the hearer, as a model for how to think about God, some “exemplar,” which is such that his claim would be literally true of the exemplar. And, at least if he is indeed expressing a true claim about God, he is doing more than just *presenting* the exemplar; he is saying—whether in virtue of the semantic features of the utterance or so-called pragmatic features of the utterance and its context—that God is like the exemplar in certain salient ways.

But now suppose further that the individual has no way, even if we were to allow him to expand his vocabulary, of literally expressing any of the specific ways in which God is like the exemplar. Say the best he could do, if he had to speak literally, would be to simply say that God is like the exemplar, period. And suppose that the same is true of everyone else who speaks his language. In such a case, it is difficult to see how the individual could have a *concept* or *notion* that corresponds to any of the specific ways in which God resembles the exemplar. If he did, his linguistic community should be able to introduce a term to express those ways in a literal fashion. But without such a concept, then he cannot say *at all*—no matter what sort of language he uses—that God is like the exemplar in any specific way. The claim he will be expressing in that case is just that God is like the exemplar, period—but that has next to no non-trivial *consequences*. Any two things are alike in some, perhaps quite gerrymandered, respect. It similarly *explains* next to nothing. So if you are looking for interesting explanatory or logical relations between theological claims, it will be fruitless to employ ones that are irreducibly metaphorical or figurative.

What about ones that you can express partially in a literal manner? The same argument shows that the only component that can perform philosophical work of explaining or entailing is the reducible component of the claim; the rest is explanatorily and logically otiose (although by no means does it show that it is otiose, period). Thus, a philosopher who is seeking an explanation—and one that entails the explanandum to boot—is duly warned not to be satisfied with an “explanation” that is irreducibly figurative, and duly advised to recognize that the irreducibly figurative component of a claim can do no heavy philosophical work.

Is the above argument successful? I doubt it. It seems to establish too much; if it were successful, it would show that one could not even *understand* a claim that one could not (even upon Socratic questioning and extensions of one’s language) express literally, and this latter assertion appears to be false. More to the point, it relies on a dubious

claim that one cannot express a property, say, without possessing a corresponding concept or notion.<sup>29</sup> Some philosophers think that it is precisely one of the functions of metaphor and other figures of speech to enable the speaker to express a property that the speaker cannot (at present) conceptualize. The speaker does so by exploiting certain features of the context, such as the exemplar, much in the same way as a speaker uses a demonstrative.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the argument probably fails to establish its intended conclusion.

But defending our methodological scruples requires a more modest conclusion, for which the dubious assumption is not necessary. Even if someone could express and vaguely grasp a property-attribution claim without possessing a concept corresponding to that property, and even if that property attribution claim indeed *has* non-trivial consequences and explanatory power, I don't see how he could, with any confidence, *determine* what that claim—or at least the component of the claim that extends beyond his conceptual repertoire—entails or explains. Possessing the relevant concepts seems essential to making such determinations. So, if one grants that ineliminably figurative uses of language entail deficient conceptualization on the part of the speaker, then it is surely good practice to avoid such language when trying to tease out logical and explanatory relations between one's claims.<sup>31</sup>

Consider, in this light, one of the examples I cited from the book. R. Bick offered an explanation for the fact that God cannot bear to see the torment and suffering of the penitent, even if the penitent is entirely undeserving of such help. The explanation was that God identifies with the penitent, that He sees Himself in the penitent. Now, R. Bick is absolutely

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29. Where *possessing a concept* entails being able to express the corresponding property in a literal fashion, at least if one expands one's current linguistic repertoire.

30. For a rigorous and original discussion of the view, see Josef Stern, *Metaphor in Context* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), chapter 7.

31. David Shatz noted that Gersonides voices a similar objection to Maimonides' view that any predicate that is either affirmed or denied of God must carry a sense which is wholly unrelated to its ordinary sense. As Gersonides puts it, "For example, we say that God is immovable, since if he were movable He would be a body, for all movable objects [are bodies]. Now it is evident that in this proposition the term 'movable' is not completely equivocal with respect to the term 'movable' when it is applied to nondivine things. For if it were, there would be no proof that God is not movable, since the movable object that must be a body is that which is movable in the domain of human phenomena, whereas the term 'movable' (in the completely equivocal sense) would not imply that it is a body" (*The Wars of the Lord*, vol. 2, trans. Seymour Feldman [Philadelphia, 1987], 110 [3:3]).

clear that he doesn't intend his talk of God's *identifying with human beings* as strictly and literally true. That is all "as it were," or loose talk. It is quite understandable that he would insist on that. (He may also intend his talk of what God can or cannot bear to be loose and figurative, which would only exacerbate the methodological difficulties.) But then the alleged explanation is quite elusive. It is very difficult to see what *is* supposed to be doing the explaining. Is it the fact *that God identifies with human beings*? Strictly speaking, there is no such fact. Is it the fact *that God is like human beings, in some respect or other*? Even if we are willing to say that is strictly speaking true, it neither entails nor explains much of anything. Is it the fact *that God is like human beings in being disposed to ease the burden of a suffering human being*? That seems like no explanation at all—more like a reiteration of what was to be explained! The same dilemma faces other candidates: either they are too bold to be true (strictly speaking) or too weak to serve as an explanation at all. Of course, the fact that God, *as it were*, identifies with human beings, *might* explain the fact that God cannot bear the suffering of human beings, but it is very hard to tell whether it does, and if it does, how the explanation is supposed to go. This pattern repeats itself at various points in the book. When one tries to figure out how exactly a certain entailment or explanation is supposed to go, or even what the explanation *is*, one quickly encounters trouble.

There is a price to be paid for the consistent loose and figurative use of language in theology—the price is that it's very difficult to do *philosophical* theology, at least of the sort that systematically explores logical and explanatory relations between claims. Of course, that is not necessarily a decisive reason to change how one talks in doing theology. After all, the price might well be worth the benefits of a religiously sensitive theology that resonates with our classical sources.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, I think the price is worth it. But it is a price nonetheless, and one we ought to acknowledge.

### III.

Suppose we choose to insist that much of our theological talk is only "as it were." Would that leave us with no way to do Jewish philosophical

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32. Howard Wettstein has argued for a similar thesis, as part of a larger campaign to emphasize a gulf in content, aims, and style between medieval philosophical theology and classical Rabbinic literature. See, for example, his "Against Theology" in *Philosophers and the Jewish Bible: General and Jewish Perspectives*, ed. Robert Eisen and Charles Manekin, (Bethesda, MD, 2009), 219-45.

theology? To an extent, yes—but not entirely. First, even if *much* of our theological talk is only figurative, not all of it need be. Admittedly, a theology consisting just of what we can say literally and truly will not be as rich as we would like—and almost certainly will not be adequate for a vibrant religious life—but it might provide enough material for philosophizing.

Second, there might be other ways to do philosophical theology aside from exploring logical and explanatory relations.<sup>33</sup> To take one example, the British Idealist F.H. Bradley suggested the following philosophical method:

I will . . . begin by noticing some misunderstandings as to the method employed in ultimate inquiry by writers like myself. There is an idea that we start, consciously or unconsciously, with certain axioms, and from these reason downwards. The idea to my mind is baseless. The method actually followed may be called . . . a direct ideal experiment on reality. What is assumed is that I have to satisfy my theoretical want, or, in other words, that I resolve to think. And it is assumed that, if my thought is satisfied with itself, I have, with this, truth and reality. But as to what will satisfy I have of course no knowledge in advance. My object is to get before me what will content a certain felt need, but the way and the means are to be discovered only by trial and rejection. The method is clearly experimental.<sup>34</sup>

Philosophical inquiry, on this view, consists in the systematic testing of candidates for belief. One tests them by seeing the degree to which they strike one as *true* or satisfy one's "theoretical want." One progresses by revising one's web of beliefs, after each test, in accord with what seems true, all things considered. No investigation of logical consequences and no purported explanations.

This is surely an eccentric philosophical method and not very popular these days. It's hard to know whether something like it would be a fruitful approach to Jewish philosophical theology, since I doubt the approach has ever been tried. But the sort of "results" it would produce—assuming it produces any—would probably be just as useful as those of other philosophical approaches for the Jew who prays and repents. As R. Bick points out, the one who is praying has no need for grand philosophical theories that show the logical consistency of God's goodness and His granting man

33. There surely are other ways to do philosophy, even religious philosophy, without exploring logical and explanatory relations. Descriptive (religious) phenomenology, which characterizes much, although by no means all, of R. Soloveitchik's philosophical oeuvre, is a good example. But it's hard to see that as philosophical *theology*.

34. F.H. Bradley, *Essays on Truth and Reality* (Oxford, 1914), 311. See W.J. Mander's helpful discussion in *An Introduction to Bradley's Metaphysics* (Oxford, 1994), 14-20.

the capability to do evil (11) or that explain the relation between passions and the intellect in God (43). These issues, R. Bick says, can be left “to the great metaphysicians, the Rambam and R. Hasdai Crescas” (ibid.). The same holds true for the philosophical activities of argument and explanation more generally. Those activities may be of religious importance in their own right, but perceiving a logical or explanatory relation between theological claims is of little importance for those who cry out in prayer. If they cannot see (as I cannot) how it is that God’s identifying, as it were, with human beings, *explains* or *entails* God’s inability to resist our cry, little is lost. Much more would be lost if they did not see God identifying, as it were, with human beings in the first place.

Consequently, my discussion of the philosophical elements in the book must be put in perspective. Whether or not the philosophical arguments in the book are successful, the book’s chief objective is to deepen the understanding of one who prays—to understand why he recites the thirteen *middot* and what he ought to mean when doing so. In order to accomplish that aim, what is really needed is to propose for the reader’s consideration penetrating suggestions that seem *right*, both to one familiar with our sources and to one who prays. R. Bick has certainly succeeded in doing that. His insights—those that are local to each attribute together with larger themes that thread throughout the discussion—strike me as true and true to religious experience.

A particularly striking example is the suggestion, which R. Bick returns to in the context of several different *middot*, that there is a price to be paid for invoking the *middot* in the course of repentance: a penitent temporarily relinquishes, to some degree, his freedom, autonomy, creativity, and responsibility.<sup>35</sup> He *must*, if he sincerely asks God to share the burden and responsibility of his sins. Of course, a penitent ought to be willing to pay this price in order to survive and, ultimately, restore his relationship to God, but it is one he would profit from bearing in mind. Speaking from experience, I can say that bearing it in mind can certainly add depth, significance, and gravitas to one’s recitation of the *middot*. But in order to adequately appreciate and benefit from this and other suggestions that R. Bick advances, the reader is strongly advised to study R. Bick’s rewarding volume for himself.

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35. See p. 58 (*Rav H̄esed*) and p. 91 (*Noseh Avon VaFesha VeHata’a*).

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