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This contribution to the Open Access Project is an essay by Dr. Joshua Golding, previously published in *The Torah U-Madda Journal* vol. 10, on a perennial issue that desperately need clarification. To what extent may one interpret the Torah non-literally? This has been a burning issue, on and off, since the medieval period and has arisen again in modern times, particularly in regard to the Creation story.

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JOSHUA L. GOLDING

On the Limits of Non-Literal Interpretation of Scripture from an Orthodox Perspective

Introduction

In this paper I shall focus on those Scriptural passages which are narratives, that is, accounts or descriptions of personalities, matters of fact, or events, as opposed to those passages which constitute legal or ethical injunctions. It is well known that within the Orthodox Jewish tradition, many narrative passages are taken to have another meaning in addition to their literal or plain meaning.¹ It is also well known that some rabbinic commentators assert that certain passages are not to be taken literally at all. Some of these latter cases are controversial, and some are not.²

For the sake of discussion, let us define a *purely non-literal* interpretation as one which denies the literal or plain meaning of that passage. At times, the attempt to interpret Scripture in a purely non-literal way is motivated by the belief that the plain meaning of the Torah should not conflict with *Madda*—that is, knowledge derived independently of Scripture by human reason or empirical inquiry. For example, the suggestion that the account of creation in *Bereshit* is to be taken purely non-

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literally may be motivated by a belief that the literal meaning conflicts with the modern scientific view of the origin of the cosmos and its contents. Especially for those Orthodox Jews interested in the relationship between *Torah* and *Madda*, this kind of suggestion raises the following question: Are there limits to non-literal interpretation of Scriptural narratives from an Orthodox Jewish perspective? And, if there are limits, is it possible to formulate precisely what those limits are?

The essay is divided into two sections. Section I selectively discusses some of the literature relating to this topic, and clears ground for the second section. Section II attempts to describe some of the limits of pure non-literal interpretation of Scripture from an Orthodox perspective. However, Section II also argues that it is impossible, or at least, very difficult, to provide a set of criteria that will determine, for any and all non-literal interpretations, whether they are consistent with Orthodoxy. While this conclusion may sound disappointingly inconclusive, I believe it is important and instructive to understand the reasons for it.

Some preliminary remarks are in order. To truly do justice to this topic would require an account of the notions of “literal” and “non-literal” meaning, as well as careful distinction among various forms of non-literal meaning, such as allegory, myth, metaphor, simile, parable, figure of speech, exaggeration, and so on. However, for present purposes, it suffices to say that the “literal” meaning of a word or sentence is its *standard* or *usual* meaning. For instance, the word “hand” usually refers to a certain body part. Thus, the rabbinic interpretation of the statement, “God has a hand” that claims that God has power but does not actually have the body part understands the expression purely non-literally.³ Similarly, denying that the “tree” in the story of the Garden of Eden is a physical tree with limbs and branches amounts to offering a purely non-literal interpretation. Furthermore, any interpretation which denies the historical existence of Scriptural personalities would be purely non-literal. For instance, the suggestion that Abraham was not a historical person but rather symbolizes a character-type is an example of a purely non-literal interpretation.

My working assumption is that we can make progress on the question of what are the limits of non-literal interpretation of narrative passages in Scripture, without first providing a complete theory of “literal” versus “non-literal” meaning, and without delving into the various specific forms of non-literal interpretation. I beg the reader to reserve judgment on whether this assumption is overly simplistic until after reading the entire paper.

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Before moving on, let us clarify what this article does *not* aim to do. It does not aim to formulate *all* of the desirable features for an Orthodox interpretation of Scripture. For example, one desirable feature might be that it inspire the reader toward worship of God. However, we must distinguish the question of whether a given interpretation is *consistent* with Orthodox Judaism from whether it is the *best* Orthodox interpretation. Secondly, this article does not investigate when Orthodox Judaism *requires* pure non-literal interpretation. Rather, our business in this paper is the issue of when pure non-literal interpretation is *acceptable* and consistent with Orthodoxy. Finally, this article will not consider a question closely related to our topic: what are the limits of purely non-literal interpretation of narratives in *rabbinic* literature (Talmud, Midrash, etc.)? Although we shall refer to the rabbinic literature, our focus is Scripture.

I.

Let us begin by reflecting on what appears to be a prevalent approach among Orthodox Jews: one must always take Scripture literally, unless one has a compelling reason not to do so. We will refer to this approach as the literalist preference. According to the literalist preference, one's initial assumption is that Scripture is to be interpreted literally; one moves to a non-literal interpretation strictly as a last resort. This section critically examines some of the possible grounds for holding that the literalist preference is part and parcel of Jewish Orthodoxy. Toward the end of this section, I shall argue that the literalist preference does not by itself delineate any criteria for the limits of non-literal interpretation from an Orthodox perspective. It is the goal of Section II to attempt to formulate some of these criteria. The conclusion of this paper revisits the literalist preference, and argues that in conjunction with another set of criteria, a modified version of the literalist preference is indeed required by Jewish Orthodoxy.

At first glance, the literalist preference is supported by the Orthodox notion of Torah as the word of God, the Divine truth, or "*Torat emet*." Surely, God does not lie or invent fictions! Perhaps, here and there, God introduces a figure of speech or a metaphor, for some compelling reason or other. But surely God would not issue a document which contains one falsehood after another. So, runs this argument, if the Torah is what Orthodox Judaism takes it to be, we must interpret it as literally as we can. Any purely non-literal interpretation is a threat to the divinity and truth of God's word.

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However, this argument is flawed. Perhaps it is the purely non-literal interpretation that is “true” and therefore “divine.” The advocate of pure non-literalism—let us call him the “allegorist”—accepts the notion that the Torah is both “divine” and “true”; he simply regards its “truth” as generally non-literal. The allegorist need not view the Torah as a series of falsehoods or fictions. On the contrary, the allegorist may view the Torah as teaching the most fundamental Divine truths, intentionally couched in language that (he claims) should not be taken literally. In fact, the allegorist may embrace the idea that every single word of the first five books of the Torah was revealed to Moses at Sinai, and nevertheless think that many of the narratives are not literally true (not to mention the remaining books of Scripture). After all, God may well have reasons for issuing a document that is to some extent, even a large extent, non-literally true. Hence, the argument above does not *by itself* establish the literalist preference.

A more sophisticated way to support the literalist preference may be as follows: As a general rule, it makes sense to take *any* text at its word, unless one has good reason for not doing so. If we stopped taking texts at their word, language would lose its meaning. In fact, the very idea of a “non-literal” interpretation presupposes the notion of a “literal” interpretation; the notion of a “non-literal” interpretation is tied to the practice of taking words to mean what they usually mean, which is to say, in their literal or plain sense. Hence, all who use words in the effort to communicate commit themselves to being taken literally, at least as a general rule.

Nevertheless, it is one thing to accept the literalist preference as a matter of general linguistic practice; it is quite another to insist that it is required by Jewish Orthodoxy as a mode of interpreting Scripture. After all, while the literalist preference makes sense as a general rule, it does not necessarily make sense in application to the word of God. We must therefore investigate the sources (*mekorot*) of Judaism to determine the grounds, if any, for the literalist preference.

In a recent paper, Shubert Spero suggests that certain passages in *Bereshit* should be taken non-literally.⁴ However, Spero begins his paper by *endorsing* the literalist preference. He cites the talmudic statement, *dibberah Torah bi[ki]-leshon benei adam*—that is, “the Torah speaks in [like] the language of man”—to support this claim. This statement suggests a bridge across the gap mentioned in the argument above: Spero argues that just as when human beings speak, we take them literally unless we have good reason not to, we should also take the Torah literally, unless we have good reason not to. Spero then goes on to argue that we sometimes have “good reason” not to take the Torah literally. It is

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not the aim here to examine Spero's interpretations of those passages, but to examine his grounds for the literalist preference.

There is, in fact, irony in Spero's use of the talmudic statement "the Torah speaks like the language of man" to support the literalist preference. In the hands of Rambam (and other medieval writers as well), the phrase connotes precisely the opposite of what Spero interprets it to mean. Specifically, Rambam says that the Torah speaks in parables (*meshalim*) when it speaks of God's hand or God's foot. To address the question of why the Torah speaks in this way, Rambam says, "the Torah speaks like the language of man."⁵ That is, the true meaning of the Torah is *different* from its literal meaning, and the Torah cloaks its true intent because it "speaks in the language of man." Yet Spero quotes this passage in support of the literalist preference! Spero's use of this phrase may well be closer to its original meaning in the Talmud than Rambam's use of it is. However, I will argue that the original meaning of this statement does not by itself support the literalist preference.

The original talmudic source of the view that "the Torah speaks in the language of man" appears to be R. Yishmael's opinion in disagreement with R. Akiva.⁶ R. Akiva posits that when the Torah uses a double language (such as *hikkaret tikkaret*), it teaches us something additional; that is, something beyond the plain meaning of the text. R. Yishmael responds that this double language does *not* teach anything extra, for "the Torah speaks in the language of man," as if to say, human beings customarily use a double language for emphasis (especially true in Hebrew; less so in English). It turns out, then, that Rambam uses this passage in the opposite manner from R. Yishmael. Whereas Rambam uses the phrase to support his claim that the Torah has a hidden meaning and is not always to be taken literally, R. Yishmael uses it to suggest that there is *no* hidden meaning to be uncovered in the use of the double language!⁷

But does R. Yishmael's statement support the literalist preference? And would Spero really be willing to claim that the literalist preference was endorsed only by R. Yishmael and not by R. Akiva? If not, the literalist preference cannot be supported solely by appeal to R. Yishmael's statement. Furthermore, one could claim easily that even R. Yishmael holds that the principle, "the Torah speaks like the language of man" applies only to the case of the *doubling of language*. There may therefore be other passages which even R. Yishmael would argue should be taken non-literally. For, as far as I am able to discover, throughout the Talmud, the statement "the Torah speaks like the language of man" is applied only to the doubling of language in Scripture, and is never mentioned in any other context.

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A similar point holds for another well-known talmudic passage, one which on the surface lends even greater support to the literalist preference, namely, *ein mikra yozei mi-yedei peshuto*—“no text may be taken out of [lit., leaves] its plain or literal meaning.”⁸ However, as far as I can discover, throughout the Talmud, this principle is cited only in application to legal or halakhic passages of Scripture, and *not once* to passages involving events or personalities. Therefore, the Sages of the Talmud may well have considered the Scriptural passages involving events and personalities wide open, even *le-khatehillah (ab initio)*, to purely non-literal interpretation, while legal and penal passages are generally not.⁹

Are there other Orthodox grounds for the literalist preference? Indeed, the literalist preference finds an ancient and revered supporter in R. Sa’adyah Gaon. Treatise VII of *Emunot ve-De’ot* is devoted to a discussion of the Resurrection of the Dead.¹⁰ In VII:2, Sa’adyah claims that one should always aim to interpret Scripture literally, except in four cases: where the passage, if taken literally, 1) conflicts with the evidence of the senses; 2) conflicts with reason; 3) conflicts with some other passage in Scripture; or 4) conflicts with what the Sages teach in the Oral Tradition regarding the correct interpretation of a given passage (which is sometimes non-literal). But what are Sa’adyah’s grounds for the literalist preference?

In Chapter 2, Sa’adyah simply states his view without argument. Then, after discussing the topic of resurrection, he returns to this initial claim and finally suggests an argument for it in Chapter 4, namely, that the failure to take the Torah literally whenever possible inevitably undermines obedience to the commandments. For, Sa’adyah claims, if one can take any passage non-literally, one can take the legal imperatives non-literally, resulting in the abandonment of traditional halakhic observance.¹¹ Sa’adyah adds, without argument, that if the legal imperatives cannot (generally) be taken non-literally, so too the narrative portions of Scripture should not (generally) be taken non-literally.

Sa’adyah’s argument is very intriguing; but let us examine its cogency. Sa’adyah does not argue directly that pure non-literal interpretation of the narrative portions of Scripture is itself wrong. Rather, he argues that because most of the legal passages need to be taken literally, so too most of the narrative passages need to be taken literally. There is an obvious gap in this argument. One might try to fill it as follows: Given the assumption that most of the legal passages must be taken literally, it would be hermeneutically strange if most of the narrative passages may in fact be taken purely non-literally. Perhaps we must resort to a “principle of charity” here. As long as we attribute rational and coherent intentions to

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authors whenever possible, and assume that an author is not trying to confuse the reader, we may recognize the difficulty in thinking that God would wish to be taken (almost always) literally in halakhic passages, and (almost always) non-literally in narrative instances.

However, if this is Sa'adyah's intention, he has not shown that the literalist preference is *required by Orthodoxy*. We might concede that an interpretive strategy which takes most legal passages literally, and many or most narrative passages purely non-literally is "hermeneutically strange." But that in itself would not explain why the strategy is un-Orthodox. Besides, it is conceivable that God might have had reasons for producing such a document. After all, it is generally agreed by all Orthodox commentators that there are instances when Scripture is to be interpreted purely non-literally. Orthodoxy understands, then, that God has reasons for producing a document which is to be taken purely non-literally in *some* instances. Those in favor of pure non-literal interpretation might claim that such instances are more widespread than is customarily thought.

A different way of attempting to fill in the gap is to say that Sa'adyah intends a "slippery slope" argument. Namely, that if we allow ourselves to interpret the Torah purely non-literally in cases which *do not* threaten commitment to the commandments, we may be led to interpret the Torah purely non-literally when doing so *does* threaten commitment to the commandments. If so, however, his argument suffers from all the weaknesses of "slippery slope" arguments. Surely, any mode of interpreting Scripture may result in disaster if taken to the extreme! This does not require us to relegate or confine that mode of interpretation to only those circumstances where it is absolutely unavoidable.

If indeed it is legitimate to worry that some non-literal interpretation may threaten obedience to the commandments, perhaps Sa'adyah should have endorsed a more narrow criterion, such as, *never interpret Scripture purely non-literally in those cases where doing so will undercut a commitment to the commandments*. Of course, we then need to define which cases undercut a commitment to the commandments. This discussion will be taken up in Section II.

In any event, if one does accept the literalist preference, whether as a matter of general linguistic practice, or as a matter of Jewish Orthodoxy, one is allowed, nay, forced, to move to a purely non-literal interpretation when there is a compelling reason for doing so. Granted, disputes will occur over whether there is a compelling reason for taking certain passages non-literally. For example, Rambam (*Guide* II:42) suggests that the account of Balaam's conversation with his donkey should not be

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taken literally; but other readers of Scripture disagree. Shubert Spero suggests that the account of Creation, the story of the Garden of Eden, and the account of the flood should not be taken literally; but other readers disagree. Finally, consider Sa'adyah's own case. Sa'adyah argued that since the literal interpretation of the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead does not conflict with reason or with the senses, we must take this doctrine literally. This in itself is ironic, as the Sages (*Sanhedrin* 90b) have a difficult time showing that any Scriptural passage literally implies the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead! No doubt, there are some who would propose that literal interpretation of those passages that suggest the resurrection of the dead in fact conflicts with the evidence of the senses, and would therefore prefer to take such passages purely non-literally. Hence, regardless of whether one accepts the literalist preference, it is desirable to seek a substantive criterion for the limits of non-literal interpretation from an Orthodox perspective. That is the object of the next section.

II.

In order to determine the limits of pure non-literal interpretation from an Orthodox Jewish perspective, we need a working understanding of Orthodox Judaism. It seems safe to start with the assertion that Orthodox Judaism is *committed to Halakhah* (though this statement requires amplification and amendment). As a rule, then, from the Orthodox Jewish perspective, *one must avoid any purely non-literal interpretation of Scripture which would undercut a commitment to Halakhah*.¹² Assuming that this is correct, we must consider in greater detail, what is involved in commitment to Halakhah? We must then consider the ways that a purely non-literal interpretation of Scripture might undercut halakhic commitment.

There are those who think that Halakhah consists only in a set of bodily practices (*mizvot ha-guf*) or physical "do's and don'ts": eating *mazzah* on *Pesah*, putting on *tefillin*, not eating non-kosher food, not violating *Shabbat*, etc. Let us include under this rubric such verbal practices (*mizvot ha-peh*) as saying the *Shema*, reciting the account of the Exodus on *Pesah*, pronouncing certain blessings and prayers, not blaspheming, not praying to false idols, and so on.

According to this view, one might conceivably endorse a liberal criterion for the limits of non-literal interpretation of Scripture. That is, one might insist that the *meaning* or *significance* of these bodily and verbal practices is irrelevant to determining whether one maintains a com-

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mitment to Halakhah. Furthermore, there need be no connection between the meaning of specific passages in Scripture and one's bodily or verbal practices. Thus, no matter how one interprets Scripture, one is counted as "keeping the Halakhah" as long as one adheres to certain practices. For example, consider an atheist who regards the entire Scripture as an allegory for man's never-ending, never-to-be-fulfilled quest for meaning in life. It is conceivable that such a person could rigorously observe all the bodily and verbal practices of Judaism, as a way of symbolizing this quest for meaning. According to the view described above, such a person would qualify as "keeping the Halakhah."

However, this rather limited view of Halakhah is seriously mistaken. Surely, Halakhah *includes* many bodily and verbal practices. However, the Sages of the Talmud understood the Torah to include certain cognitive as well as affective commandments: to know God; to revere and fear God; to love God; to worship God; to have faith in God; as well as, to remember the Exodus from Egypt; to remember the attack of the Amalekites, etc.¹³ Furthermore, according to some rabbinic authorities (including Rambam), Halakhah includes commandments to believe (or even, to know) certain propositions, such as, God exists, God gave the Torah, etc. Apparently, there are many commandments that involve not only the body and the mouth, but also the heart and the mind. If indeed this is so, it is a mistake to claim that Halakhah consists only in certain bodily and verbal practices.

Furthermore, our initial assumption that Orthodox Judaism involves a "commitment to Halakhah" needs amplification. Orthodox Judaism involves a certain self-understanding that sets Halakhah in certain (a) theological and (b) literary contexts. In other words, Orthodox Judaism includes an understanding of the theological grounds for and significance of maintaining halakhic commitment, as well as an understanding of Halakhah as *rooted* or *grounded* in certain texts, namely, the Hebrew Scriptures. Both of these points have important consequences for the question at issue in this article, and both points require exposition.

Roughly stated, the Orthodox theological self-understanding runs as follows. There is a God, who is supremely powerful, intelligent, and good.¹⁴ God knows and cares about the world, and He takes interest in its moral and spiritual direction. God is aware of our most intimate thoughts and actions, and He manages our destiny in response to what we do, both individually and collectively. At some point in history, God elected or chose the people of Israel and formed a covenant with them. Subsequently, God gave them the Written and Oral Torah, which includes specific commandments, as well as specific promises about

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what God will do to and for the people, as long as they keep the Torah (or fail to do so). Furthermore, this self-understanding includes some account of God's purpose in giving the Torah; that is, to establish a relationship of mutual recognition and love with Israel. More specifically, God seeks to express His presence among the people of Israel, through their observance of the Torah. Both the Pentateuch and the remainder of the Scriptures describe God's interactions with Israel, detailing specifically how God's relationship with Israel hinges on the extent to which Israel keeps the Torah. Finally, it must be added that Halakhah is the application of the Torah as understood and articulated by Torah scholars to the daily life of the Jew.¹⁵

This "meta-halakhic" self-understanding gives some account of the why and wherefore of keeping Halakhah. Lacking that self-understanding, Halakhah loses, or at least radically alters, its theological significance. Many of the elements described above are incorporated symbolically into Halakhah itself. Certain physical commandments symbolize key aspects of the self-understanding; for example, circumcision symbolizes the covenant between God and Israel. Indeed, certain verbal commandments make direct reference to elements of the self-understanding: the halakhically mandatory recitation of *Shema* includes an affirmation of the existence or reality of God, and the daily prayer includes a petition for the return of God's presence to Israel. Finally, again, at least some authorities, such as Rambam, hold that beliefs (in God, in the Divine origin of the Torah, etc.) are halakhically binding. However, even if they are not, it is undeniable that the traditional *raison d'être* for halakhic commitment is basically the one described above.

Suppose, then, that a person keeps the physical commandments scrupulously, but rejects the notion that God exists, and believes that the only reason to observe the commandments is to maintain social cohesion among the Jewish people. Or, suppose that a person believes that God exists, but that the Torah contains not Divine commandments, but human speculations regarding God's preference for the behavior of Israel. Finally, suppose a person believes that the Torah represents God's commandments, but that it does not represent a way to achieve a special, intimate relationship with God. Any of these latter alternatives would constitute a break with Orthodox Judaism.

Orthodox Judaism, therefore, maintains a theological grounding for halakhic commitment. And, as stated before, it mandates that Halakhah be grounded in text—in particular, Scripture. In my opinion, textual grounding is crucial to Orthodox Judaism primarily because the trans-

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mission of the Scriptures from one generation to the next plays a key role in the maintenance of Orthodox commitment. In other words, Orthodox Judaism carries with it a conception of its own epistemic basis. By “epistemic basis,” I mean a rationale or justification for commitment to Orthodox Judaism. This rationale includes the point that Jews possess a certain set of texts which are understood to teach certain principles and practices. These texts have been handed down from generation to generation, together with an oral commentary that interprets the texts. This claim is central to the Orthodox conception of its own epistemic basis.¹⁶

Suppose, then, that a person believes in God, but also believes that Scripture has nothing to do with God, and that its teaching about God is true, but only by chance. Suppose even that someone believes in God, and believes that God has ordained certain commandments upon Israel, but that these commandments were transmitted orally for centuries, such that the text of the Torah as we encounter it has no significant connection with God. Suppose, for example, that this person believes that the Scriptures were clandestinely manufactured in the Middle Ages, and that they became mistakenly accepted as holy writ. A person who regards the Scripture in this way would have departed from Jewish Orthodoxy, even if he continues to observe the commandments.

Some readers may want to insist that Orthodox Judaism is defined strictly by whether one obeys Halakhah, and that it is invalid to import extra-halakhic or meta-halakhic material into the definition of Orthodox Judaism. To my mind, this objection is misguided, for Orthodox Judaism is based not only on Halakhah, but more broadly on Scripture and Talmud. Scripture and Talmud teach many things that are not strictly part of Halakhah, but which provide a “context of significance” for Halakhah. To break from that context of significance is to break from Orthodox Judaism.

If what has been said so far is correct, then a purely non-literal interpretation of Scripture might be said to depart from Orthodox Judaism in two ways: 1) by undercutting some particular bodily, verbal, cognitive, or affective commandment(s); or 2) by undercutting some aspect of the traditional meta-halakhic self-understanding. I shall suggest that in the final analysis, pure non-literal interpretation—if taken to the extreme—poses a greater threat to undercut Orthodox Judaism in the second way rather than the first.

Let us consider first the ways in which a purely non-literal interpretation might undercut some of the commandments. An allegorical interpretation of the Scriptural account of the Exodus, for example, might

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claim that, historically speaking, the Israelites were never in Egypt, and they never ate *mazzah* during the Exodus. Rather, the entire Exodus story, including the account of the eating of *mazzah*, is an allegory for spiritual redemption, wrought by God for the people of Israel. Now, which specific commandments might such an interpretation negate?

One is tempted to say that this interpretation negates the physical commandment to eat *mazzah* on *Pesah* as well as the verbal commandment to retell the story of the Exodus. One might even suggest that it negates the cognitive commandment to remember the Exodus and the affective commandment to worship God. For, if we didn't actually eat *mazzah* during the Exodus, and we didn't actually exit Egypt, how can we ritually reenact, or remember, an event that never happened? And if God did not literally take us out of Egypt, on what basis do we have the obligation to worship God? Doesn't Scripture suggest that our obligation to worship God is grounded in the fact that God took us out of Egypt?

However, the allegorist has a ready response to all this. He may retort that all of these commandments are to be understood as grounded in the spiritual redemption as signified allegorically in Scripture by the story of the Exodus. The allegorist may affirm that God commanded us to ritually re-enact this spiritual event verbally (by retelling the story); cognitively (by remembering the "Exodus"); and bodily (by eating *mazzah*). Furthermore, he may argue that our affective duty to worship God is rooted in this spiritual redemption.

Now, the literalist might insist that as a matter of human psychology, ordinary people would be less inclined to keep the commandment of *mazzah* were they to believe that the physical, historical event did not happen. In turn, the allegorist responds that it becomes *easier* to keep a commandment if it does not depend on some physical event of the past. That is, as long as one's observance depends on the occurrence of the event, one's commitment to the commandment is threatened any time the occurrence of that event is called into question. In any event, the issue of whether a given interpretation makes it more (or less) likely that people will obey a given commandment is beside the point. An interpretation of Scripture is not disqualified as "unorthodox" simply because it is less inspiring than some other interpretation.

The key point is that even if a commandment is ostensibly based on a Scriptural account of some event or fact, the allegorist may claim that this account should be interpreted purely as an allegory for some broad historical or metaphysical truth, and that God wishes us to perform that commandment precisely because of that historical or metaphysical truth. It

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seems to me that this strategy is available to the allegorist for many (if not all) of the commandments, whether bodily, verbal, cognitive or affective.¹⁷ Consider for example the cognitive commandment to “remember the attack of Amalek.” The allegorist may suggest that the narrative of the battle with Amalek did not take place literally as described, but that it is an allegory for the perennial conflict between Israel and its enemies, which will eventually end when God destroys those enemies once and for all. For the allegorist, the commandment “to remember Amalek” is fulfilled by “remembering,” i.e., bringing to mind, this historical phenomenon.

Furthermore, even for those who accept the notion that there are commandments to believe certain propositions, a similar approach will apply. For any given commandment to believe a given proposition *p*, ostensibly based on Scriptural account *A*, the allegorist suggests that we have an obligation to believe *p*, even though *A* is not to be taken literally. For that matter, he may suggest that *p* need not be taken literally either.

Nevertheless, as I signalled earlier, this strategy is objectionable because it risks conflict with the traditional meta-halakhic self-understanding.¹⁸ Let us consider how this is so.

Recall that Orthodoxy takes Halakhah to be grounded in a certain theological and literary context. It is difficult, and, quite arguably, impossible, to formulate completely the elements of the theological grounding of Halakhah in a series of statements or propositions. In fact, I am sympathetic to some extent with the view that systematic theology is foreign to Orthodox Judaism. However, in order to advance our discussion, and with several important caveats, I submit that the following propositions describe at least some of the core elements or principles of the traditional theological self-understanding:

- 1) There is a God who is supremely powerful, intelligent and good; God knows our most intimate thoughts and actions, and He manages our destiny in response to what we do.
- 2) God has chosen the people of Israel from all the nations, and has formed an everlasting covenant with them. The fate of Israel depends on how they relate to God.
- 3) God has given the Written and the Oral Torahs to the people of Israel; the Torah contains a certain way of life which God has commanded upon Israel.
- 4) God has given the Torah to the people of Israel (at least partly) in order to manifest or express His presence among them.

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Let us not forget either that Orthodox Judaism grounds the commitment to Halakhah in a certain set of texts, viz., the Scriptures. In other words, Orthodox Judaism trusts the Scriptures to express or teach the above four principles. To deny any of the above principles, or even to deny that the Scriptures teach any of the above principles, runs counter to Orthodox Judaism. We shall return to this point shortly.

First: please note that there may well be other principles in addition to these four. Certainly, each of these principles could be developed or expanded to include a number of sub-principles. For example, the proposition that there is a God might come to include sub-principles describing the nature and attributes of God (e.g., God is incorporeal or God is infinite). Moreover, these sub-principles are less hard and fast than the four main principles stated above. One might claim that God establishes certain general providential guidelines or laws according to which the world is run, whereas another might see God as an “interventionist,” such that the notion of a “providential law” does not apply. In stating the above principles, I by no means intend to suggest that this list is exhaustive and complete. Rather, it is simply a rough attempt to represent propositionally the core of the traditional self-understanding.

A second caveat: some may suggest that the four principles above are not on equal footing. For example, proposition (3), which states that God revealed certain commandments to Israel, might be seen as more important than proposition (4) which describes *why* God did so. Others might suggest that proposition (2), regarding God’s covenant with Israel, is more important than proposition (3) (or *vice versa*). Alternatively, one (or more) of the above four principles might be subsumed as a sub-principle under another. Regardless, the four propositions above describe the core elements of the traditional self-understanding; whether or not some of these propositions may be subsumed under others is not relevant for our purposes.

A third caveat is that the above is *not* intended as a list of dogmas that Orthodox Jews are halakhically bound to believe.¹⁹ I doubt, for instance, that any great rabbinic scholar has ever claimed that there is a specific commandment to believe (4) above. Nevertheless, (4) describes an important part of the theological self-understanding of Orthodox Judaism. The reason (or, at least, one reason) why it is significant to keep the Torah is that by doing so, we are allowing God to become manifest or expressed in the world. Whether it is *per se* a *mizvah* to believe this is another matter which we need not here settle.

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So much by way of caveat. I have claimed that propositions (1) through (4) represent the core of the traditional meta-halakhic self-understanding. I wish next to advance the following claim: *From an Orthodox Jewish perspective, propositions (1) through (4) must be understood in their literal or plain sense.* For, to deny the literal or plain sense of any of these propositions would radically undercut the theological grounds for and significance of keeping Halakhah. Not only does denial of the literal sense of these propositions depart from the traditional or “received reading” of these propositions, but taking any one of the above propositions purely non-literally actually undermines the *meaning* or *significance* that is at stake in adhering to Halakhah. Suppose, for example, one claims that there is literally no God; or, suppose one claims that there is a God, but that God does not literally know about or govern the world. Or suppose one claims that there is such a God, but that He did not literally issue commandments in the Torah. It is hard to see, then, how any non-literal interpretation of “fulfill the commands of God” could carry the same weight as does a literal reading of the phrase. The same holds true for the other propositions. To assert that Israel does not literally have a covenant with God, or that Israel does not literally promote the manifestation of God’s presence within itself by keeping the Torah, is to radically undermine the significance of keeping Halakhah.

On this last point, some readers may be inclined to insist that it is impossible to enable God’s presence to *literally* become manifest within Israel, so this principle must be taken non-literally. However, I believe this inclination should be resisted. It is an essential teaching of Orthodox Judaism that such a relationship with God is not only *literally possible*, but also that this relationship is *literally actual*. Of course, it is difficult to formulate a complete theory or philosophically sophisticated account of what is involved in this notion. Needless to say, such a formulation is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it is an essential teaching of Orthodox Judaism that God utilizes the people of Israel as a vehicle of self-expression of His own character or personality. To believe anything less than this is to depart from Orthodox Judaism. A similar point holds for the other principles as well; namely, the complete formulation or philosophical theory of what it means to assert that *There is a God*, that *God chose Israel*, that *God gave the Torah*, etc. is beyond the scope of this paper. Acceptance of these propositions in their plain or literal sense is an essential part of Orthodox Judaism.

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If what we have been saying is correct, then from an Orthodox Jewish perspective, *one may not interpret purely non-literally any Scriptural passage which directly asserts any of the above propositions (1) through (4)*. Indeed, even if one were to accept the above four principles in their literal sense, and yet (somehow) interpret Scripture in such a way as to deny any of these principles, one would thereby abandon the Orthodox Jewish conception of the Scriptures as the textual ground for commitment to Halakhah.

Now, let us return for a moment to the first caveat mentioned above; namely, each of these four principles has many “sub-principles.” Again, precisely what those sub-principles are may be a matter of debate and discussion among those committed to the principles themselves. Similarly, whether or not those sub-principles are formulated in such a way that they must be taken literally may also be a matter of debate. For example, Rambam might argue that the principle *God is incorporeal* is a sub-principle that explicates the very notion of God in principle (1). Furthermore, he would claim that this sub-principle must be understood in its plain sense. Someone else might argue that God’s governance of the world must be understood to include Divine care over the individual members of all species. Again, it is impossible here to give a complete theory of what all the sub-principles are and which ones need to be taken plainly or literally. All we can do here is note that at the very least, the above four principles must be taken in their plain sense, and that possibly there are other principles or sub-principles which must be taken literally as well.

This is one reason why it is very difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at some set of criteria to answer the question posed at the head of this paper, *what are the limits of pure non-literal interpretation from an Orthodox perspective?* The only way to answer this question definitively is to provide a complete list of all the doctrines or teachings of Orthodox Judaism which must be taken literally. In addition, one needs to identify which of those doctrines are asserted or implied by the literal meaning of any Scriptural text. Only then could one say, once and for all, which texts must be taken literally. But both of these tasks are difficult, if not impossible, to do. Any such list would be controversial, since there is disagreement even among the Orthodox over some of the doctrines of Judaism or at least how to interpret them. Furthermore, in some cases there may be honest differences over the literal meaning of a given text.

However, we *can* describe *some* of the limits, that is, *some* of the Scriptural passages, that must be taken literally from an Orthodox perspective, and that is what I have attempted to do here. So far, we have

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said that any Scriptural passage which directly asserts or implies any of the above four principles above must be taken literally.

We must, however, consider an important yet complicating factor. Namely, it is a relatively rare occasion when Scripture (especially the Pentateuch) directly asserts any of the four principles mentioned above. Generally speaking, these principles are exhibited by the Scriptural narratives or implicitly contained therein. For example, Scripture does not start off with the assertion, “There is a supremely powerful and intelligent God.” Rather, it sets forth the account of creation, which implies or exhibits the notion that there is a supremely powerful and intelligent God.

Similarly, other narratives exhibit or imply the other ideas mentioned above. The accounts of the lives of the patriarchs in *Bereshit* exhibits the principle that God knows about the world and governs it, as well as the principle that God has formed a covenant with Israel. The account of Abraham’s encounter with Avimelekh (wherein the latter took Sarah and was subsequently punished for doing so) shows that God is aware of the events which occur in the world, and that He intervenes in order to govern. Furthermore, the account of God’s redemption of the people of Israel from Egypt implies that God maintains His covenant with Israel. The account of the revelation at Sinai contains the principle that the Torah is Divinely revealed. The account of the construction of the Tabernacle and the subsequent indwelling of the Cloud of Glory exhibits the principle that God seeks to manifest His presence within Israel. Indeed, much of the remainder of the Scriptures implicitly contain the notion that God’s relationship with Israel depends upon the extent to which Israel keeps the Torah; Israel’s failure to keep the Torah results in exile, or the removal of God’s presence from Israel. Arguably, in one way or another, all of the principles discussed above are implicitly contained throughout Scripture.

Suppose, then, that one advocates a purely non-literal interpretation of the entire account of Creation. Thus, God did not literally create the world, which in turns implies that the world is not entirely under God’s dominion or control. If so, the purely non-literal interpretation undermines our first principle, that God is supremely powerful and intelligent. Suppose one claims that the accounts of the lives of the patriarchs in *Bereshit* are purely allegorical, illustrating truths about the people of Israel and God’s relationship with them. Suppose further that the patriarchs symbolize personality archetypes, which represent aspects of the character of the people of Israel. If the assertion is that not one of these accounts is historically accurate in its plain sense, then this inter-

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pretation undermines the proposition that God has literally formed a covenant with the people of Israel. These interpretive suggestions are therefore inconsistent with Orthodox Judaism.

Moreover, suppose one suggests that the entire account of the revelation at Sinai is literally not true. Suppose it is suggested that the people of Israel never passed through Sinai, Moses is a mythical figure, and the account of the revelation of the Torah stands for a Divinely inspired code of law which God instilled in the Jewish consciousness. One is forced to ask, what is the nature of this Divine “instilling”? Did God *command* the Jewish people to obey the Torah or not? If the claim is that God did *not* do so, then this interpretation is clearly inconsistent with Orthodox Judaism. But if it is maintained that God *did* command the Jews to obey the Torah, leaving this interpretation consistent with Orthodox Judaism, then the premise of this interpretation is inconsistent. After all, if God did command the Jews to obey the Torah, then at least some of the account of revelation must be understood in their literal or plain sense (e.g., Ex. 20:1: “And the Lord spoke, saying these things. . .”). Hence, a purely non-literal interpretation of the entire account of the revelation at Sinai is inconsistent with Orthodox Judaism.

It is also important to bear in mind that many Scriptural episodes are thematically linked or integrated with other narratives. For example, the narrative of the revelation at Sinai is integrated with the narrative that describes the Exodus from Egypt. Therefore, if one must take some portion regarding the giving of the Torah literally, then perhaps one must take at least some of the description of the Exodus from Egypt literally as well. For, how would the people of Israel have known or believed that it was genuinely Almighty God who spoke at Sinai had they not previously experienced God’s might and power through the Exodus? And these narratives are not unique in their interdependence; taking some passages of Torah literally entails taking others literally as well.

If this argument is correct, then many passages in Scripture must be taken literally if one wishes to remain within the Orthodox framework. However, there is still room for purely non-literal interpretation. One may interpret portions of Scripture literally, and other portions purely non-literally. For example, one may read, “God created the Heavens and the Earth” as literally true, but “there was evening and there was morning” (which occurs several times before the creation of the sun) as non-literally true. This suggestion does not undercut the notion that God is supremely intelligent and powerful, and as far as the reasoning outlined in this article, such an interpretation is consistent with Orthodox Judaism.

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Similarly, one may read the account of the revelation at Sinai as literally true to some extent, but to some extent only metaphorically true. For example, the general account of the encampment at Mount Sinai may be taken literally, while the details, such as the “thunder and lightning” and the “sound of the shofar” may be metaphorical. Again, this reading does not threaten the principle that God revealed the Torah to Israel. Hence, as far as I can see, there is no reason to reject such non-literal interpretation as unorthodox.

To this point, I have claimed that pure non-literal interpretation of all of the passages which exhibit or teach the above four principles is inconsistent with Orthodox Judaism. However, I have also claimed that some portions of these passages may be taken purely non-literally. The situation becomes more complicated if one asserts that *many or several* (but not all) of the passages which exhibit or teach some of the above principles are to be taken purely non-literally. This might be problematic from an Orthodox perspective.

Consider the accounts of the lives and times of the patriarchs in *Bereshit*, and the accounts of the lives and times of Saul and David in the book of Samuel. Both sets of stories exhibit or teach certain elements of the above principles, viz., that God is aware of the thoughts and actions of individual humans beings, that the fate of the people of Israel turns on how they relate to God, and so on. Now, if one takes the accounts of the patriarchs literally, but the accounts of Saul and David purely non-literally, then in taking the former accounts literally, one accepts whatever principles are exhibited or implied by a literal reading of those passages, but in taking the latter accounts purely non-literally, one encounters complications. Recall that Orthodox Judaism includes a particular understanding of its *theological* as well as *literary* basis. A purely non-literal reading of Samuel undermines the Orthodox notion that the Scriptures constitute the literary basis for our acceptance of those principles. That is, the *epistemic basis* or *reason* for Orthodox Jews’ acceptance of the principle that the fate of Israel is contingent on the Jews’ devotion to God, is rooted not only in the Pentateuch, but also in the ongoing account of this relationship in the other Prophets and Writings. To the extent that one interprets these latter accounts purely non-literally, one undermines the notion that the Scriptures are the literary basis for accepting the theological principles upon which Orthodox Judaism is built.

We may infer, then, that, as a general rule, *extensive* or *pervasive* use of pure non-literal interpretation of the historical accounts in Scripture tends to undermine Orthodox Judaism. The Scriptures portray God as

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involved in human history in “real time.” If one denies that many of these Scriptural accounts are literally or plainly true, one threatens this notion of God, for the Scriptures need not be seen as exhibiting or teaching this crucial principle. Of course, it is theoretically possible that most of the Scriptural stories could be literally *false*, and that God could still be (somehow) involved in human history in “real time.” (A devout Christian or Muslim who believes in Divine Providence might approach much of the Hebrew Scriptures in this way.) Indeed, it is even theoretically possible that the fate of Israel depends on their observance of Torah, even if many of the historical accounts in the Prophets and Writings were not literally true. Nevertheless, the Scriptures as a whole would not then *exhibit* these crucial principles. Hence, extensive or pervasive pure non-literal interpretation of the historical accounts in Scripture runs counter to Orthodox Judaism. In effect, this suggests that we must accept a modified version of the literalist preference discussed in Section I. I shall return to this point shortly.

In summary of this section, we have identified some of the limits of pure non-literal interpretation of Scripture from an Orthodox perspective. First, one may not interpret any passage which directly asserts any of the four principles mentioned above purely non-literally. Second, while many Scriptural passages do not directly assert any of these principles, those principles are nonetheless exhibited by or implicitly contained within those passages. So, pure non-literal interpretation of *all* such passages undercuts Orthodox Judaism. Third, the *extensive* or *pervasive* application of pure non-literal interpretation to the Scriptural accounts that exhibit the four principles undermines the Orthodox notion that the Scriptures as a whole constitute the literary basis for the acceptance of those principles. Finally, let us remember that this article leaves open the possibility of other limits on non-literal interpretation beyond what has been claimed here. If other principles beyond those four which I have identified were established, and if those principles are asserted directly in any Scriptural text, then it would follow that those Scriptural texts must also be taken literally.

In conclusion, let us return to Sa’adyah’s argument and the literalist preference discussed in Section I. Recall that according to the literalist preference, *one must always take Scripture literally, unless one has good reason not to do so*. Sa’adyah asserts that pure non-literal interpretation of the narrative portions of Scripture inevitably results in pure non-literal interpretation of the legal portions of Scripture. We now understand how Sa’adyah might have made this connection, though it does not support the literalist preference in quite the way that Sa’adyah

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claimed. Pure non-literal interpretation of certain key specific narrative passages directly undercuts the theological and literary basis for the observance of Halakhah. In addition, the argument herein also supports a modified, weaker version of the literalist preference; namely, that *one should aim to avoid too much non-literal interpretation*. Extensive use of pure non-literal interpretation undermines the Orthodox conception of the Scriptures as the literary and epistemic basis of Orthodox commitment. Still, this modified version is flexible, because it does not specify, for each and every passage in Scripture, whether it must be taken literally. Furthermore, this modified version is more flexible than the standard version, because it does not relegate pure non-literal interpretation to strictly a second resort. Rather, it views pure non-literal interpretation as a legitimate mode of exegesis, which, like any mode of interpretation, should be used with care, good sense, and a familiarity with the talmudic and rabbinic sources, in order to derive the full meaning of the Scriptures from an Orthodox perspective.

Notes

I thank my father, Martin P. Golding, Anne Gordon, and David Shatz for their comments on this paper.

1. The notion that Scripture has layers of meaning aside from the literal meaning is found throughout the Talmud. The Rabbis frequently use phrases or verses from Scripture to draw moral lessons or make observations about human nature that are far removed from the literal meaning of those passages. Additionally, it is quite evident from *Hagigah* 11b ff. that the Scriptural account of Creation (Genesis, ch. 1) and of the Divine Chariot (Ezekiel, ch.1) are taken to have deeper levels of meaning (*sod*) beyond their literal meaning (*peshat*). Finally, perhaps the Kabbalists provide the most outstanding examples of sustained, non-literal interpretations of Scripture, without denying the validity of literal interpretation. In at least one instance, the *Zohar* (*Be-midbar* 152a) severely castigates those who see only the plain meaning of Scriptural narratives and fail to appreciate the inner or deeper meaning.
2. A very well-known and (at least in our day) non-controversial example is that of Rambam's discussion of the anthropomorphisms in Scripture. See *Mishneh Torah: Hilkhoh Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:9. (Ravad seems to disagree with Rambam over whether the belief that God has a body constitutes heresy or *minut*; however, Rabad himself apparently accepts the pure non-literal interpretation of the anthropomorphisms. See his comment to *Hilkhoh Teshuvah* 3:7.) A more controversial example is Rambam's interpretation (*Guide of the Perplexed*, II:42) of Balaam's conversation with his donkey in Numbers 22. According to Rambam's interpretation, despite the plain sense of the text, the donkey did not actually speak. Rather, the whole episode is a vision. According to Rambam (commentary *ad loc.*), God performed a miracle and the donkey literally spoke.

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3. Rashi (Ex. 14:31) very sensibly suggests that the word “hand” has different meanings, and that the appropriate meaning must be determined from the context. However, the fact remains that any interpretation of the term “hand” as something other than a body part is not the *usual* or *standard* meaning of that term. Hence, for the purpose of this paper, the interpretation of God’s “hand” as something other than a body part counts as “non-literal.”
4. Shubert Spero, “The Biblical Stories of Creation, Garden of Eden and the Flood: History or Metaphor?” *Tradition* 33:2 (Winter 1999): 5-18.
5. Rambam, *Mishneh Torah: Hilkhoh Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:12. A further irony is that in responding to criticism of his original paper, Spero himself uses this very phrase to defend his non-literal approach to certain Scriptural passages (*Tradition* 34,1 [Spring 2000]: 112).
6. See, e.g., *Sanhedrin* 64b. For further references and discussion, see *Enzyklopedyah Talmudit*, entry on “Dibberah Torah ki-Leshon Benei Adam.”
7. See also Josef Stern, “Language,” in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, ed. Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (New York, 1987), 548-50. There is at least one passage (*Sifra* on Lev. 20:2) which seems to diverge from this pattern. “Rabbi Eliezer comments, the Torah speaks in the language of man, in many terminologies [*leshonot*], and all of them need to be interpreted [*le-hiddaresh*].” However, see Malbim’s discussion *ad loc*. Malbim reads Rabbi Eliezer as *agreeing* with the opinion of Rabbi Yishmael. The statement “Torah speaks in the language of man” applies to the first part of the verse (which uses the double language “*ish ish*”); the statement “all of them need to be interpreted” refers to another part of the verse.
8. See, e.g., *Yevamot* 24a. For further references and discussion, see *Enzyklopedyah Talmudit*, s.v. “*ein mikra yozei mi-yedei peshuto*.” This principle is cited in favor of the literalist preference by Daniel Eidensohn and Yosef Hakohen (*Tradition* 34:1 [Spring 2000]: 111-12). In response, Shubert Spero notes—as Rambam would have claimed (see n. 2 above)—that this principle need not (indeed, cannot) be taken as applying to all narrative Scriptural passages (*ibid.* 112-113). I make a similar point here. See also below, n.11.
9. Arguably, there is some resistance to non-literal interpretation in *Bava Batra* 15a. A certain anonymous student suggests that the entire Book of Job is a *mashal* (allegory), and that Job was not a real person. The objection is then raised, if this suggestion is correct, why then does the Book of Job cite specific names and places? No answer is given, but the Talmud moves on to another issue and does not clarify that the student’s suggestion has been conclusively refuted. It is worth noting, all the same, that the Talmud does not attempt to refute this suggestion by citing the principle “*ein mikra yozei mi-yedei peshuto*.” This is yet another reason to think that the Talmud restricts the scope of this principle.
10. Sa’adyah Gaon, *Emunot ve-De’ot*, Arabic text with Hebrew translation, by R. Yosef Kapaḥ (*Sefer ha-Nivḥar be-Emunot ve-De’ot* [Jerusalem: Sura 1960]). In English, *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. S. Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951).
11. As an example, Sa’adyah hypothetically poses as a purely non-literal interpretation that the prohibition against *ḥamez* on *Pesaḥ* is a roundabout way of stating a prohibition against illicit sexual relations. He suggests that someone who interprets the Torah this way would abandon the traditional prohibition against eating *ḥamez* on *Pesaḥ*.

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12. In effect, this is part of Sa'adyah's strategy discussed in the previous section.
13. The view that Orthodox Judaism consists strictly in obedience to Halakhah was championed more recently by Yeshayahu Leibowitz. However, Leibowitz insists that Halakhah includes not only physical actions but also attitudes, such as love and fear of God. Yet, it is not clear whether Leibowitz holds that love and fear of God require cognitive commitment. In particular, it is unclear whether he holds that there is *absolutely no* "cognitive content" or "information" that one must accept or believe as part of Halakhah; or that there is some "cognitive content," but it is radically different from the kind of cognitive content that is associated with modern science. See, e.g., "Religion and Science," reprinted in *Judaism, Human Values and the Jewish State*, 132-41 (Cambridge, MA, 1992). A discussion of Leibowitz's views here would take us too far afield.
14. See Ramban's Commentary on Rambam, *Sefer ha-Mizvot*, Commandment 1. Ramban suggests that *Ba'al Halakhot Gedolot* does not count belief in God as one of the 613 commandments because it is a foundation for the acceptance of the commandments. For the purpose of this paper, I have avoided taking a stand on the question of whether any beliefs are halakhically mandatory.
15. A critic may object that in this summary, I have selected only certain aspects of the traditional narrative, and omitted many others. Is it not also part of the traditional narrative that, for example, King Solomon ruled at a particular time, that he had many wives, etc.? But one must distinguish between the traditional narrative as a whole, and those aspects of the narrative which constitute the *rationale* or *grounds* for our commitment to Halakhah. Had King Solomon not lived at a particular time or not had many wives, the grounds for our commitment to Halakhah would remain unchanged. The situation is very different if it were the case that God does not exist or that the Torah was not Divinely revealed.
16. This characteristic of traditional Judaism is exhibited in the attempt by the Sages of the Talmud to find sources for almost all teachings (legal, moral and spiritual)—as in the ever-present talmudic question, "*mai kera?*" ["what is the textual source for . . .?"] I do not mean to assert that every particular within Orthodox Judaism is grounded in a text; there is, of course, the category of *halakhah le-Mosheh mi-Sinai* (a law given to Moses at Sinai). However, the system as a whole is taken to be deeply rooted in the Scriptural text.
17. A possible exception to this is mentioned below. See note 18.
18. Obviously, conflict would ensue if it could be established that there is a halakhic obligation to believe not only that "God issued commandments upon Israel," but also that this proposition must be taken literally. If this were established, it would follow tautologically that one violates or fails to fulfill a commandment if one interprets purely non-literally all Scriptural passages that assert that God issued certain commandments upon Israel.
19. Also, it is an entirely separate, albeit important, issue whether someone who breaks from Orthodox Judaism is disqualified from membership in the people of Israel, from God's good graces, from a share in the world to come, is to be branded "heretic," etc. This is an issue Menachem Kellner addressed in his critical discussion of Rambam. See Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* (London, 1999) and David Berger's critical review in *Tradition* 33: 4 (Summer 1999): 81-89.

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