Religious Experience as a Jewish Educational Ideal

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Introduction

In “The Relationship Between Repentance and Free Choice,” the fourth chapter in his On Repentance, Joseph B. Soloveitchik takes as his theme the idea of knowing God—an idea that has the potential to remain abstract and purely intellectual. Along the way, however, he indulges in a moment of extraordinary personal testimony. “I do not like to talk about myself,” he writes, “but since I cannot tell you what others have experienced, what I relate here must necessarily be my own experiences.” What are these private experiences?

Sometimes I study Torah deep into the night. Of course, these are the best hours for Torah study—things appear clearer, sharper. It happens, in the course of my study, that I sense someone standing near me, bending over my shoulder and peering at my page of Gemara, looking precisely at the same subject on which I am focusing, and nodding his head at a new idea whose accuracy I am still considering.

1 Pinchas Peli, Soloveitchik: On Repentance (Paulist Press, 1984), pp. 141-142. This text is the English translation of the Hebrew Al Ha-teshuvah, itself a rendition by the author of the original lectures by Soloveitchik delivered in Yiddish. One must be wary, therefore, of relying on any particular passage; however, in this case, we have a remarkably similar idea that appears in Soloveitchik’s address to the convention of the Rabbinical Council of America in 1975.

Somehow, when I open a gemara, either alone or when I am in company, when I teach others, I have the impression—don’t call it hallucination—I have the impression that I hear soft footsteps of somebody, invisible, who comes in and sits down with me, sometimes looking over my shoulder. The idea is not a mystical idea—the mishnah in Avos, the gemara in Brachos says yachid sheyoshev v’osek batorah, shechina shruya [one who sits and occupies himself with Torah, the Divine presence rests there]. We all believe that the nosein hatorah, the One who gave us the Torah, has never deserted the Torah. And He simply accompanies the Torah; wherever the Torah has a rendezvous, an appointment, a date with somebody, He is there.

This passage is taken from a transcript by Eitan Fiorino available online at <http://www.mail-jewish.org/rav/talmud_torah.txt>. (Note that the actual lecture can be heard online as well; it is located at <www.ericlevy.com/Recordings/Recordings.htm>, as the first lecture on “Geruś.” The audio makes it clear that Soloveitchik was not reading from a prepared text, so here, too, care must be taken in how much one may rely on any particular formulations.) Three points need to be made about these passages. First, for the sake of accuracy, the transcriber notes that the quote “yachid sheyoshev…” is not quite a precise rendition of the sources (Mishnah Avot 3:6 and BT Brachot 6a). Second, in contrast with the passage from On Repentance, Soloveitchik expands the experience (from the isolated circumstances of the first passage) to include even moments when he is in the company of others—not just late at night, but in fact when he is teaching! Third, in each case Soloveitchik expresses the religious experience that accompanies Torah study in terms of his personal mourning. In On Repentance, the sentence on page 142 that follows the passage quoted above reads as follows:

My ability to get over what befell me during these past few years [a footnote to the text reads: Since the death of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s wife, Dr. Tonia Soloveitchik, of blessed memory, on the thirteenth of II Adar 5727] is due to the fact that I relate to this principle of “Torah from Heaven” not merely in the sense of “to believe” but also in the sense of “to know.”

That is, his knowing God, which has something to do with the presence he sometimes feels late at night, has comforted him in his loss. He declares something similar in the 1975 RCA lecture, in a passage that precedes the one quoted above by just a few sentences.

If not for the study and teaching of Torah, I would have lost my sanity in the year of triple aveilus in sixty-seven [a footnote to the transcript reads: Aveilus is mourning. In 1967, the Rav lost his
Apparently, Soloveitchik has experienced a non-physical presence—a presence that, moreover, communicates assent to, or expresses a judgment about, an interpretation about which Soloveitchik himself was still unsure.²

What are we to make of such testimony? That question serves as the focus of a long tradition in scholarship in the psychology of religion. Some, of course, are inclined to dismiss such testimony as evidence of a delusional mind. Others might share the basic reductionism of that approach but would be more charitable in their explanation. They might say that the testimony does tell us more about the experiencer than the experienced; but, rather than assuming that any such testimony is a symptom of disease or imbalance, they will be inclined to explain (or explain away) the testimony in terms of other, normal, psychological factors.³

But if we take such testimony seriously—if we neither dismiss it as mere delusion nor reduce it to some other psychological or physiological condition—then we might ask whether this kind of religious experience represents a religious ideal. Ralph Hood makes a case for the centrality of religious experience across religious traditions:

While neither in the West nor in the East have the great faith traditions rooted their entire traditions upon the experience of the faithful, it is fair to state that all traditions defend both the reality of what is experienced in ultimate states and the possibility that at least some of the faithful have such experiences within the span of their temporal lives.⁴

However, to defend the reality of what is experienced by select individuals is quite different from endorsing such experiences as a religious ideal.⁵

But if it does represent such an ideal in some sense, we might notice further that religious experience of this sort is not typically the focus of attention in Jewish educational theory. Studies in and of Jewish education tend to revolve around the specifics of Jewish schooling or other settings, or to investigate the modes and methods of teaching in those settings, or to consider the curriculum of Jewish studies, or to investigate the nature of Jewish identity and the impact of educational interventions upon it. To the extent that we consider the goals of Jewish education, we do so in terms of knowledge, skills and values; or we do so in terms of commitment and identity. We do not hold religious experience, in this sense of direct personal experience with the divine or the transcendent, to be an educational goal. We generally do not envision that the

mother, his wife, and his brother]—I was on the verge of mental collapse and breakdown. I did not. I emerged victorious, and this is due to one thing only— I would say my mad dedication to Torah.... I was [hit] that year and the following years; I felt somehow that I was not alone, that I had somebody; there was somebody invisible but whose presence I felt, to confide in; there was somebody on whose shoulder I could cry; there was somebody from whom I could almost demand words of solace and comfort.

Here, too, Soloveitchik weaves together the sense of personal solace from God, a presence that provides consolation with engagement in Torah study.

² Note that the presence Soloveitchik describes does not serve as his muse, generating his ideas, but rather as an observer.
³ For example, this latter group might take Soloveitchik’s association of his religious experience with consolation in his state of mourning (see the preceding footnote) to indicate a particular psychological process at work.
⁵ The point is this: Even if such experiences are believed and taken seriously, it should not be assumed that they are desirable or worthy of aspiration. One might claim that they are real but inexplicable, or real but subversively anti-normative, or real but unsuitable as an educational goal, or real but psychically dangerous. Furthermore, note that even if one does call such an experience a “religious ideal,” one need not claim that it is the highest ideal, or that all religious activity ought to eventuate in such an experience. I will return to this point later.
products of our educational systems will have such experiences, and do not consider what might promote or hinder them.\(^6\)

Does this state of affairs represent a principled stance on the inauthenticity of religious experience, or its anti-normativity, or its psychological danger? Does it represent a conviction about the impossibility of facilitating the religious experience of another person? Or is it merely a reflection of the difficulty of the topic in general, and the pressures on educators and educational institutions to focus their attention on the clearly defined and clearly understood? This article will try to examine the question of whether we ought to hold religious experience as a Jewish educational goal and, more fundamentally, to ask what this might mean. In other words, the objective is not simply to advocate for education toward (Jewish) religious experience, as if this were a clear and clearly positive goal. It is not, and the literature does not provide the kind of serious examination of the issue, through either conceptual or empirical avenues, that would allow us to adopt such a position. Instead, the objective is to begin to probe what such an education would entail and what some of the theoretical, moral and practical obstacles might be. The inquiry is, therefore, motivated by the sense that these questions are not commonly asked, and by the further sense that, when they are asked, they are not answered with enough attention to the tradition of scholarship in comparative religious studies.

In what follows, the task will be undertaken of asking what William James (1842-1910) and Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) might have to say about these questions, by analyzing their key texts in order to develop two contrasting models of education for religious experience (in the section entitled “James and Otto on Educating Toward Religious Experience”). After developing these general models, we will adopt a more critical stance, probing the ways in which they seem problematic in a specifically Jewish context (in the section entitled “Education Toward Jewish Religious Experience”). Before all this, however, the next section will attempt the inevitably incomplete task of articulating what religious experience is and, particularly, what it is not.\(^7\)

**What Is Religious Experience?**

If we are to ask whether it is possible to educate for religious experience, we must first come to some understanding of the nature of that experience, however preliminary and tentative. Of course, that is precisely the project that James and Otto took up in the early part of the twentieth century; but, even before turning to them, we can begin by clarifying what religious experience is not or, rather, which sorts of phenomena that are sometimes called “religious experience” are not at issue here. For example, it is important to distinguish direct religious experience, what Hood calls “the experience of foundational reality,”\(^8\) from any and all experiential components of religion—that is, any and all behaviors or performances of ritual.\(^9\) Ritual can be performed either mindlessly or meaningfully, of course; one can go through the

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\(^6\) A survey of the literature of religious education suggests that the overwhelming majority of references to “religious experience” refer to the performance of rituals (either educating for such performance, or conducting such performance in educational settings and for educational purposes). This is not, of course, illegitimate; these are experiences within religious contexts and with religious purposes. The idea of “experiential education” contributes to this usage; the experience in experiential education is not a goal, primarily, but a means. It is precisely for that reason that it is important to distinguish experiential components of religion from religious experience in the narrower sense in which it is being used here.

\(^7\) James and Otto are employed here without any claim regarding their inherent superiority to other theorists. On the other hand, surely no apology is needed to defend the consideration of these figures, who still loom large in the field. Consider the recent observation that “the work of Schleiermacher/Otto and James has dictated much of the shape of the current discussion” of religious experience (Herbert Burhenn, “Philosophy and Religious Experience,” in *The Handbook of Religious Experience*, p. 149). Note, too, the editor’s forward to this volume, in which he mentions (p. 11) “the lack of a much needed body of research in this important area [of teaching toward religious experience].”

\(^8\) Hood, “Facilitation,” p. 570.

\(^9\) See above, footnote six.
motions or one can invest those motions with kavanah, intention. Even in a situation where there is some kind of genuine kavanah—even when one performs a ritual out of a conscious feeling of sacred obligation, or when one consciously ascribes a particular meaning to the ritual—the experience of performing that ritual under those circumstances is still not, itself, the kind of religious experience at issue. For example, the ritual of lighting Shabbat candles may be performed meaningfully, either in the sense of the focus and intention of the performer or in the sense of the significance of the ritual to the life of the performer; but it is not, itself, a religious experience in the sense under discussion.

A similar distinction may be drawn even in the cases of two particular mitzvot that seem to represent religious experience in its fullest: namely, study and prayer. That is, both these mitzvot can be pursued by rote or without the proper intentions. One can mumble the words of prayer and one can study to impress others with one’s knowledge. But one can also pray with meaning and one can study Torah lishmah, for its own sake. However, even the performance of prayer and study with kavanah does not necessarily represent religious experience in the sense of a transformational encounter with the transcendent. Setting aside the complicated issues of the precise requirements of kavanah in prayer and of the standard of lishmah in study, it is clear that these represent a lower threshold than the criteria for religious experience.

Somewhat more difficult are distinctions between religious experience and aesthetic experience, and between religious experience and the experience of fellowship or community. In each of these cases, a person experiences moments that transcend the typical and the mundane. When one sees a glorious sunrise, the beauty of the vision may be overwhelming, such that one is transported to a different mental and emotional place. When one participates in certain kinds of group activity—accomplishing demanding collective tasks, for example—there is the possibility of feeling a connection with the group that is deeper and richer than simple membership, a connection that transcends normal patterns of identification. When both are conjoined—when one climbs Masada at sunrise with one’s youth group, seeing the glorious sunrise after accomplishing the significant physical feat together—one may well be tempted to consider that experience a religious one. And not without reason: The experience may well be transcendent and even personally transformative in profound emotional or possibly behavioral ways. Nevertheless, these experiences are oriented toward the beautiful object or toward the community, rather than toward the transcendent itself. In that sense, they may be conducive to, or perhaps related to, religious experience (in the narrower sense) but not constitutive of it.

Notice that Soloveitchik, in his testimony above, does not simply say, as he does say elsewhere, that God is present wherever Torah is studied. He does not merely exult in the fellowship or communal bond generated by Torah study, not even the imaginary fellowship of scholars that spans generations. Nor does he identify the beauty or profundity of the textual solution that he had discovered as the object of his religious experience, like a mathematician who believes she has glimpsed the transcendent in the formulas that she creates. Quite the contrary: it is rather that, in this case, the presence he experiences stands apart from the textual solution he has created. We know, because that presence passes judgment on the solution; the object of the religious experience is the approving presence rather than the solution that is approved. The experience to which Soloveitchik testifies, then, is not an experience of study itself and not the fellowship that the study engenders, but an experience of, or encounter with, something else that stands (quite literally) apart from the text and from his study of it.

Finally—and this, too, is not unambiguous—religious experience seems distinct from a general religious sensibility or stance toward the world or toward one’s experience of the world. Religious experience is not simply an attitude of wonder or awe or joy, not even when these

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10 Hood puts the point as follows: “Natural factors that may facilitate religious experience, either of the numinous or the mystical, are not themselves exhaustively explanatory of the transcendent” (Hood, “Facilitation,” p. 570).
attitudes are firmly embedded in a theistic worldview. These may well be religiously motivated emotions, and holding them may well have religious value. One might even claim that they are a necessary condition to religious experience. But such stances or attitudes are not, themselves, religious experiences in the sense under discussion. One might possess a sense of the unity or harmony of the cosmos, but this seems different than an experience of that unity to which some attest. Earlier in the essay quoted above, Soloveitchik writes about the experience of the beauty of nature:

A man goes outdoors on a fair summer’s day and sees the whole world blossoming; that man comes ‘to know’ that there exists a Primary Being Who is the originator of all this; in every budding flower, in every rose opening its petals, in each ray of light and in every drop of rain. The world, the flowers, the drops of rain lead one to a certain kind of knowledge of the divine. This knowledge is, without doubt, religiously significant, perhaps even religiously paramount; but such knowledge seems quite different from the powerful experience of a presence looking over one’s shoulder described in the first passage quoted.

The argument to this point has been tentative rather than committed, because the distinctions suggested here are attempts to disentangle aspects of human experience that are closely related. If the distinctions hold, religious experience in the narrow sense is a phenomenon separate from (even if possibly associated with) the performance of religious ritual including even from the mitzvot of prayer and study, from aesthetic experience and from experience of community and fellowship, and from religious emotions or sensibilities such as awe or wonder or joy. Instead, religious experience is the personal transformative encounter with the transcendent or the divine, or with “foundational reality.” To say more than this, we might well want to turn to the scholarship of comparative religion. The next sections of the paper, therefore, introduce James and Otto; but rather than offer a treatise on their conceptions of religious experience, a task well beyond the scope of the present paper, the focus is on the more specific question of how one might educate for that experience.

James and Otto on Educating Toward Religious Experience

Invited to deliver the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh in 1901 and 1902, William James took the opportunity to develop his interest in the psychology of religion, and presented his audience with a detailed exploration of testimonies about religious experience, among which the testimony of Soloveitchik would not have been out of place. James’ exploration of these first-hand accounts was critical but not unsympathetic, in the interest of defending not religious ideas.

11 While this is not the place to enter into an analysis of Schleiermacher’s theory of religion, it is certainly worth calling attention to the centrality in that theory of the feeling of dependence. However, Hood cites both J. D. Bettis and Peter Berger for the claim that Schleiermacher did not mean to reduce religion to mere subjective emotion, and that he should be read in a more sophisticated way (Hood, “Facilitation,” p. 572).

12 Soloveitchik, On Repentance, p. 132.

13 Some may wonder, more critically, if we have assumed what we set out to prove. However, our purpose is not to prove the reality of religious experience in the sense under discussion, but only to entertain the possibility of its validity and to ask about the implications for education.

14 It is worth acknowledging that some may reject the model of religious experience put forward here altogether, not on skeptical grounds but rather on the religious grounds that the ideal is not (momentary) encounter with God but (constant) love of God. For example, see Yitzchak Twersky in his essay on Maimonides in Visions of Jewish Education (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 64. When one speaks of love of God in Maimonides, it is not love of or for an object that one has experienced, as if the experience of, or encounter with, the object comes first and then the love of the object that one has experienced comes afterward. Rather, love of God is, itself, the peak religious experience. One might say that whatever else one experiences—whatever Soloveitchik experienced in the passage quoted above—is not religiously significant.
or theological principles but rather the possible legitimacy of the underlying experiences. His
overriding agenda was to reject the kind of reductionism described at the outset of this paper, an
approach that dismisses all such accounts as delusionary or symptomatic of some other bodily or
mental phenomenon. The lectures were a success, and were immediately published as *The
Varieties of Religious Experience*. As an indication of the book’s enduring value and impact, it
has remained in print ever since, for over one hundred years.

Rudolf Otto, a German Christian theologian, distinguished himself as one of the earliest
proponents of a study of religion that is genuinely comparative, immersing himself in the study
and translation of Hindu literature and traveling widely in East Asia. In his enormously influential
1917 book *The Idea of the Holy*, he argued that the experience of the holy is basic to all religious
experience, and his analysis led him to a characterization of the object of that experience as both
*mysterium tremendum*, the mysterious “wholly Other” before which one trembles, and *
mysterium fascinans*, the mystery to which one is attracted.

At first glance, the theories of religion put forward by James and Otto seem to have little
place and little regard for religious education at all. Each seems to focus so exclusively on the
religious experience of the individual—and on the individual’s instincts, intuitions and feelings—
that it may be difficult to imagine how such experience might be communicated from one person
to another. Without the possibility of communication, the notion of educating someone else
toward religious experience seems hopeless. Education is, however, more than just
communication; education is an encompassing endeavor to facilitate or encourage the
development of another individual. The question remains: Is it possible to educate for religious
experience?

James’ Model: Clearing Out Space

The most obvious and remarkable feature of James’ *Varieties* is, as noted above, its
persistent use of first-person accounts of religious experiences to construct its argument. Indeed,
James makes almost no mention of people other than those claiming to have had the experience
themselves, neither as contributors to that experience (let us call such people “teachers,” taking the
word in its broadest meaning) nor as beneficiaries (“students”). To the extent that James does
refer to groups of people, religious communities of students, he believes that they “live at second-
hand upon tradition.” He writes that for the “ordinary religious believer”—the student who
partakes of “second-hand religious life”—“his religion has been made for him by others,
communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by
habit.” He finds the few instances of conversion experiences that take place under the influence
of teachers to be “mainly those of very commonplace persons, kept true to a pre-appointed type by
instruction, appeal, and example.” He can hardly contain his contempt, convinced that in the
transition from the religious experience of one person to the beliefs or practices of others, religions
become at best derivative and at worst utterly corrupt.


17 *Varieties*, p. 30.

18 *Varieties*, p. 6.

19 *Varieties*, p. 200. Conversion experiences, of course, are particularly good material; they represent religious experiences
that have real consequences in the future life of the experiencer. It is worth considering, though, whether James’
celebration of these conversion experiences blinds him to the value of non-conversionary religious experience, on the one
hand, and non-epiphanic conversion processes, on the other.

20 Consider James’ paradigmatic biography of religions, in which religious geniuses attract disciples, who produce “groups
of sympathizers,” who organize in turn into “ecclesiastical institutions with corporate ambitions of their own,” sullied by
both “the spirit of corporate dominion” on the one hand and “the spirit of dogmatic dominion” on the other (*Varieties*, pp.
This denigration of the “second-hand” is rooted in the conviction that communication is a flawed medium of experience. Why should it be impossible to communicate adequately the content of experience? James believes—as does Otto, as we shall see—that the rational does not exhaust human experience:

If we look on man’s whole mental life as it exists, ...we have to confess that the part of it which rationalism can give an account is relatively superficial.  

Rationalism, here, is not to be contrasted with irrationalism, in the sense of belief in the face of contrary evidence or belief that contradicts reason. Instead, the opposite of the rational is not the irrational but the non-rational or, perhaps, the pre-rational. The rational is identified here with descriptions, explanations and theories; the pre-rational is the experiential and the pre-linguistic. Thus, James continues by saying that

if you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits.

On the other hand, language is not entirely impotent. In describing one part of Varieties, James notes that

whether such language be rigorously exact is for the present of no importance. It is exact enough, if you recognize from your own experience the facts which I seek to designate by it.

That is, while language may never be able to adequately communicate experience, it may nevertheless be sufficient to point toward an experience that the listener, or the student, has had. But what if one has not had the experience that the communication seeks “to designate”? Elsewhere, James compares what it is like to have had, or not to have had, an experience:

In all these matters...one must have “been there” one’s self in order to understand them.... One can never fathom an emotion or divine its dictates by standing outside of it. In the glowing hour of excitement, however, all incomprehensibilities are solved, and what was so enigmatical from without becomes transparently obvious.... The only sound plan, if we are ourselves

334-8). It is worth noting that James considers his own book, Varieties of Religious Experience, to suffer from a similar, derivative status.

21 Varieties, p. 73.

22 This is not to say that he rejects the role of reason; quite the contrary. He writes that while experience is always primary to thought, on the other hand “feeling is private and dumb, and unable to give an account of itself” (Varieties, p. 432). Not only does it lack the capacity to communicate itself, but it also lacks the capacity to evaluate and judge. Reason is, at once, secondary to feeling, and its immediate and unavoidable consequence: “even in soliloquizing with ourselves, we construe our feelings intellectually” (Varieties, p. 432). Note that it is precisely this picture – of experience followed by the rational articulation in language – that Steven Katz has opposed: “Contrary to the prevailing scholarly view [including that of James], we must recognize that a right understanding of mysticism is not just a question of studying the reports of the mystic after the experiential event but also of acknowledging that the experience itself, as well as the form in which it is reported, is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experience.... The Christian mystic does not experience some unidentified reality which he then conveniently labels ‘God,’ but rather has the at least partially prefigured Christian experiences of God, or Jesus, and so forth” (Steven T. Katz, “The Conservative Character of Mysticism,” in Steven T. Katz, ed., Mysticism and Religious Traditions, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 4-5). It is this kind of argument, which underwrites the general concern about the project of comparative religion as a whole, to which we will return in the final section.

outside the pale of such emotions, is to observe as well as we are able those who feel them, and to record faithfully what we observe.²⁴

Here we have, as clearly as we could have hoped, a statement on religious education and on the project of Varieties itself. James reiterates the difference between talking about religious notions and experiencing them, and re-affirms the poverty of the former in comparison to the latter. However, if we have not “been there,” all is not lost. “To observe as well as we are able,” “to record faithfully”—in educational settings, we might replace “record” with “describe” or even, yes, “teach”—these are legitimate projects for religious education. Teaching is never an adequate replacement for the experience itself, but surely a teacher might employ Varieties as a faithful record of the observation of religious experience, and surely James would endorse that use of the record as a “sound plan.”

Considered from the side of the teacher, then, communication about religious experience is possible, though always derivative; but to whom should it be communicated? We have already seen that James draws a distinction between those for whom a description of religious experience correlates with their own experience and those for whom it does not. Now the question is not whether the student has in fact had a religious experience, but whether she is capable of having such an experience. This introduces the problem of temperament. James famously distinguishes between the healthy-minded and the sick-souled, the optimistic and the pessimistic. At times, he seems to indicate that some people possess a religiously-minded temperament, while others do not. If so, it raises questions about the possibility of religious education, or at least about its likely success. What good will it do to describe religious experience to one who does not possess a religious sensibility?

Here, however, we must recall James’ fascination with conversion: despite his rhetoric in some places,²⁵ he clearly does not believe that temperament is fixed. Some people may be healthy-minded and some may be sick-souled; but the former sometimes develop into the latter, and the latter are sometimes born again. In perhaps his most explicit articulation of the idea of religious temperament, James writes that there are some people for whom, “to the end of their days,” religious experience is unavailable: “Their personal energy never gets to its religious centre, and the latter remains inactive in perpetuity.”²⁶ At first glance, this appears to confirm the idea that some people possess a fixed temperament ill-suited to religious experience. But note the metaphor of alienation, in which the persons (or their “personal energy”) are distant from their home, their “centre.” So while it is true, as a matter of empirical reality, that some people do not and cannot open themselves to religious experience, such a condition is nothing other than a regrettable pathology. Religious sensibility, in principle, is available to every human; some people may deny this of themselves, but James simply cannot bring himself to believe them.²⁷

However, even if James is convinced that, in principle, all people are capable of religious experience, we are still confronted with the problem of communication. What is it possible to teach in religion, if every communication is derivative and second-hand? If religious experience is shared, communication may point to that shared experience; but if it is not, “if we are ourselves outside the pale of such emotions,” then we are only able to observe and record. We can certainly rule out the teaching of theological systems, divorced from the actual religious experience that

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²⁴ Varieties, p. 325.
²⁵ E.g., Varieties, p. 35 and pp. 47-8.
²⁶ Varieties, p. 205.
²⁷ There is, of course, much more to be said about the notion of temperament in James. It should certainly be noted that, as a result of his analysis of temperaments, James endorses a deep pluralism: “Ought all men to have the same religion? Ought they to approve the same fruits and follow the same leadings?” (Varieties, p. 333; also see p. 162). James thus issues a fundamental challenge to one-size-fits-all religious education that ought to be taken seriously.
gave them their initial impetus. We can also rule out reductionist explanations of religious phenomena, such as those that explain away religion in terms of sexuality or “medical materialism.” Finally, James seems to have little appreciation for ritual, ceremony and custom: “Whenever a procedure is codified, the more delicate spirit of it evaporates.” In his view, the prescription of religious ritual can never generate the kind of spontaneity that is required for genuine religious experience.

Is it, then, impossible to educate for religious experience? To be sure, James is wary; the process of conversion, or religious experience generally, is such a complex and individual phenomenon that the crude intervention of an outsider, spouting doctrine or platitude, can never produce the desired effect. On the other hand, James is impressed by the successes of hypnotic suggestion and psychotherapeutic techniques, which sometimes have the remarkable quality of curing “bad habits” just as conversion does, but through the concerted efforts of another person rather than spontaneously.

More generally, the project of the book itself gives us a clue. As he notes in his preface, “a large acquaintance with particulars often makes us wiser than the possession of abstract formulas.” Thus, there is a particular value in attending to the actual religious experience of others, derivative though it may be.

That value may be understood in terms of the removal of barriers that restrict our ability to think and feel freely; the wisdom that comes from acquaintance with particulars may enable us to see possibilities where none previously existed. The religious faculties, James suggests, may be checked in their natural tendency to expand, by beliefs about the world that are inhibitive, the pessimistic and materialistic beliefs, for example...or the agnostic vetoes upon faith as something weak and shameful.

Pessimism, philosophical materialism, the societal delegitimization of faith as unworthy of serious intellectuals: all these are barriers to religious experience. Indeed, much of his project in Varieties consists not in building up ideas but in tearing down those that are inhibitive, those that limit the spirit’s “natural faculty to expand”: a disbelief in the reality of the unseen, the judgment of ideas according to their (historical or psychological) origins rather than their “fruits,” a dismissal of the testimony of mystical states. Finally, consider the following

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29 Varieties, p. 13.
30 Varieties, p. 304.
31 In the context of discussing the contribution of outside forces to conversion, James explains that mere suggestion is never sufficient to resolve the inner torment of the sick-souled. “When you find a man living on the ragged edge of his consciousness...and then simply tell him that all is well with him, ...you seem to come to him with pure absurdities.... The ‘will to believe’ cannot be stretched as far as that.... We cannot create a belief out of whole cloth when our perception actively assures us of its opposite” (Varieties, 212).
32 Varieties, pp. 269-270.
33 Varieties, p. xxxv. As a corollary, however, there are limitations to what we ought to learn from the experiences of others. James is adamant that the psychoses of certain religious believers are not a reason to dismiss their experiences, but he is equally clear that he cannot endorse their extreme behavior. “Much that is legitimate to admire in this field need nevertheless not be imitated.... Religious phenomena, like all other human phenomena, are subject to the law of the golden mean” (Varieties, 339). If we are going to hold up extreme cases as examples, James is saying, we have an extra responsibility to make our audience—our students—aware of the competing nature of values, and of the importance of maintaining them in balance.
34 Varieties, p. 204.
35 Varieties, ch. 3.
36 Varieties, p. 18.
37 Varieties, p. 429.
rhetorical machete, hacking away at the underbrush to clear space for the consideration of the deeply unfamiliar: “Nothing can be more stupid than to bar out phenomena from our notice, merely because we are incapable of taking part in anything like them ourselves.”

For James, then, education toward religious experience may be understood in terms of a negative model: removing obstacles to the possibility of religious experience. James’ respect for first-hand religious experiences is matched by his suspicion of the derivative nature of religious teaching and ritual, rooted in his conviction of the limitations of language to communicate the content of those experiences and the impotence of dead ritual to promote them. Yet language, including his own, can serve “to record faithfully,” and those faithful records of religious experience can provide the “large acquaintance with particulars” that makes us wiser—not wiser in matters theological, not privy to eternal truths, but less inhibited and restricted in our religious sensibilities. On this model, education for religious experience can only be clearing space for new belief.

**Otto’s Model: Awakening and Arousing**

Given his focus on religious experience, especially transformative ones, it is perhaps surprising that James does not at all consider the positive conditions that contribute to such experiences. However, as a psychologist, James is not interested in speculations about the significance of the contexts of experiences, but rather in the experiences themselves. We may also consider James’ audience, and his project in addressing them; he clearly believes that they are skeptical about the validity of any religious experience at all, and denigrate its importance. Perhaps it is too much to ask of James to do more than clear space for the consideration of religious belief.

Rudolf Otto, however, is not a psychologist but a theologian. He is not interested merely in “clearing space” for the non-rational, but also in describing, discussing, explaining the non-rational, insofar as such a project is possible. Like James, Otto is committed to the primacy of religious experience and to the poverty of rational thought to encompass it. Otto, too, believes that a religious sensibility is common to all humans, despite the fact that he, like James, offers a rhetorical gesture to those who disagree. Otto, too, adopts a derogatory attitude toward most established religion and its educational efforts. However, Otto does not merely wish to defend the existence of the non-rational but to give it content; and, in doing so, he is very much concerned with the contexts of religious experiences, how they are produced, what they are similar to, and, of course, how they can be conveyed.

In the ninth chapter of *The Idea of the Holy*, entitled “Means of Expression of the Numinous,” Otto takes up the issue of the involvement of others in the religious experience of the individual. More specifically, he explicitly considers the problem of the communication of the non-rational. He opens that chapter by suggesting that exploring “the manner in which [the numinous] expresses itself outwardly, and how it spreads and is transmitted from mind to mind,” is an avenue toward achieving greater clarity regarding “the essential nature of the numinous consciousness.” In other words, the question of communicating about, or educating toward, religious experience is centrally important if we are to understand the phenomenon itself.

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39 Consider Otto’s dramatic statement early on, “Whoever knows no such moments in his experience, is requested to read no further” (*Holy*, p. 8). It is clear from the context, however, that Otto thinks this is ludicrous. There may be people who are uninterested in religion, or who find themselves confronted by too many obstacles to engage in a sympathetic reading of the book. Like James, however, Otto considers this condition a pitiable pathology. The entire content of the book is predicated on the notion that there exists a faculty, within humans, for the sensibility of the numinous. Cf. pp. 160, 162, 170 and especially 177: “The universal ‘predisposition’ is...a faculty of receptivity and a principle of judgment and acknowledgment.” In this last location, Otto goes on to establish a hierarchy of (a) all people who receive the feelings of the numinous but do not produce them; (b) prophets, who produce the feelings of the numinous; and finally, of course, (c) the Son, who does not produce the feelings of the numinous but rather embodies the numinous.

40 *Holy*, p. 60.
Otto declares that “there is, of course, no ‘transmission’ of it in the proper sense of the word; it cannot be ‘taught’, it must be ‘awakened’ from the spirit.” He assumes that by this stage in his discussion, this point is evident to his reader. After all, his central theme is the existence of the non-rational alongside (or beneath or woven together with, depending on the analogy he chooses) the rational. Here, as in James, the non-rational is not to be understood as that which is contrary to reason, but rather something like the sphere of intuition and emotional response. However, “expositions of religious truth in language inevitably tend to stress the ‘rational’ attributes of God,” since language strives to convey ideas and concepts. Similarly, religious education, which is based on language, tends toward the rational as well. By contrast, communication about the numinous is possible, but not in the same conceptual way; any attempt to directly teach about the numinous would necessarily involve concepts and is, therefore, destined to fail. What is the alternative to teaching? More precisely, how can one teach in a non-conceptual way? Here he uses the phrase “awakened from the spirit,” which implies not conveying something new but calling forth something already present.

Elsewhere, Otto uses the term “ideogram” as a label for the alternative to concepts, i.e., for non-conceptual words. In his first use of the term, in the context of discussing the notion of wrath as an aspect of tremendum, Otto explains that

in the use of this word we are not concerned with a genuine intellectual “concept,” but only with a sort of illustrative substitute for a concept. “Wrath” here is the “ideogram” of a unique emotional moment in religious experience, a moment whose singularly daunting and awe-inspiring character must be gravely disturbing to those persons who will recognize nothing in the divine nature but goodness....

This passage suggests that, in this formulation at least, an ideogram is much like a negative analogy. It is not a concept but a substitute for a concept, and it functions primarily not to tell us about what something is but about what it is not.

Nevertheless, we may still wonder what it means to teach something using ideograms rather than concepts. James, after all, acknowledged that thought about experience is inevitable, following immediately upon experience itself. The problem is that thought, concepts and communication are therefore derivative. But Otto seems to want to allow for discussion, illustration, analogizing—all of which may still be non-rational and do not suffer from the disease of being derivative. Both James and Otto agree that immediate knowledge of experience (or of the non-rational) cannot be transmitted directly. Both also agree that, on the other end of the spectrum, rational theology is of limited usefulness. Between these two ends of the spectrum, there is a realm of communication: James calls this derivative, second-hand, beneficial only insofar as it points to actual experience; and Otto calls it ideogrammatic, analogistic, similarly beneficial only insofar as it points to actual experience. Yet their conceptions are slightly different. For James, derivative reasoning about experience can have value particularly when it points to actual experience—that is, experience which is shared by speaker and listener, teacher and student. If the student does not share this experience, the most that we can hope for is the “clearing of space,” the removal of possible obstacles to religious experience. For Otto,

41 Holy, p. 2.

42 Otto refers to “the traditional language of edification...the learned treatment of religious themes in sermon and theological instruction...even our Holy Scriptures themselves” (Holy, p. 2).

43 One is tempted to associate this approach to Plato’s theory of recollection, as in Meno. This is not the place for a thorough comparison, but at the very least it is worth noting that Otto is not motivated by Plato’s concern about all learning and, conversely, Plato is considering there precisely conceptual knowledge (of geometry).

44 Holy, p. 19.
ideogrammatic discussion is not so limited as that; there is much more than can be done to contribute to, or prepare for, the experience of the numinous.

Early on in his text, soon after his introduction of the term “numinous” for the first time, Otto writes as follows:

There is only one way to help another to an understanding of it. He must be guided and led on by consideration and discussion of the matter through the ways of his own mind, until he reaches the point at which “the numinous” in him perforce begins to stir, to start into life and into consciousness. We can cooperate in this process by bringing before his notice all that can be found in other regions of the mind, already known and familiar, to resemble, or again to afford some special contrast to, the particular experience we wish to elucidate. Then we must add: “This $X$ of ours is not precisely this experience, but akin to this one and the opposite of that other. Cannot you now realize for yourself what it is?”

Education toward religious experience is not, then, a matter of transmitting knowledge, but of contributing to the development of a faculty. Note Otto’s fumbling for the proper way to characterize the activity of the teacher: helping, guiding, leading, cooperating and, finally, simply pointing at what the numinous is not. The role of the teacher is to lead, through “consideration and discussion,” through comparison and contrast, until the student reaches the point of awakening. At that point, further discussion is not only unnecessary but impossible, since the non-rational is not expressible in rational concepts. Otto closes this passage (and the second chapter) with words that are already familiar to us: “In other words our $X$ cannot, strictly speaking, be taught, it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind; as everything that ‘comes of the spirit’ must be awakened.”

How is this awakening to occur? Otto does not rule out the role of language as the catalyst, when the subject possesses the appropriate “spirit in the heart.” Better than dead, cold, written language is spoken language, with its tone and gesture contributing to the transmission of mood and feeling, facilitating a “penetrative imaginative sympathy with what passes in the other person’s mind.” In fact, it seems that the language itself does not contain the content; Otto points to the experience of the attitude and demeanor of the teacher as more significant. That is, he establishes that the experience of the numinous is not, in fact, always an isolated, individual experience. One can experience the numinous second-hand, as it were, through another individual

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45 He writes that the numinous, “while it admits of being discussed...cannot be strictly defined” (Holy, p. 7).
46 Holy, p. 7.
47 Holy, p. 7. There is an interesting interpretive ambiguity here. On one interpretation, let us call it the diachronic interpretation, the first stage of religious education brings the students to the point at which the numinous faculty (that is, the faculty which recognizes the numinous) becomes developed, at which point the student recognizes the numinous for himself or herself. On the second, synchronic interpretation, all discussion sets the stage for the teacher to be able to say, “Cannot you now realize for yourself what it is?” That is, in the first interpretation, the numinous faculty has been developed so that it does not require anyone to point to the numinous. According to the second, what is being described is not a developmental process at all, but one which takes place in every discussion of the numinous: Ideograms and analogies are deployed, and the teacher asks, “Do you see what I am pointing at?” These two interpretations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, of course, and support can be found elsewhere in the text for both.
48 It is worth noting that Otto is not as negative about the role of language and concepts in religious instruction as James is; in his view, just as religion is not encompassed by the rational, so too it is not encompassed by the non-rational. At the outset, he writes of the rational that “only on such terms is belief possible in contrast to mere feeling” (Holy, p. 1). Thus, he accepts that the rational in religion may be communicated and taught, “handed down in concepts and passed on in school instruction” (Holy, p. 60).
or through a whole community—“a solemn devotional assembly”—or through the texts that testify to and describe “actual ‘holy’ situations.”

But there are also other avenues toward religious experience, approaches that work not directly but indirectly, by evoking “kindred and similar feelings belonging to the ‘natural sphere.’” Otto offers examples of these indirect means: first and most primitively, pictures of gods as fearful, which express terror and evoke awe; and second, descriptions of the sublime, which similarly evoke awe but on a “higher level.” Another avenue, he believes, is the experience of the “uncomprehended.”

In addition, art and architecture can play a role here, by providing the experience of darkness and silence and perhaps also of emptiness or empty distances. For our purposes, what is significant is that each of these may be considered to be aspects of an educational milieu, potentially contributing to the achievement of religious experience on the part of the individual. The construction of cathedrals, the employment of silence, the situation of individuals in vast spaces: each of these is not a cheap trick, nor do any represent religious experience itself, but each is a means of awakening a capacity for genuine religious experience.

James will have none of this; for him, there can only be religious experience itself. Experience of art, of ritual, of architecture, of music may be uplifting and spiritually expansive, but there is no hidden psychological mechanism by which these experiences may be connected to, or may call forth, experience of the divine or the transcendent. For Otto, however, while the numinous cannot be expressed in concepts and, therefore, cannot be taught, nevertheless the range of tools available to us to contribute to its awakening is wide, as wide as the whole of human creativity: art and architecture, music and literature, even ritual.

To the question of how one can possibly educate toward religious experience, James’ answer is modest: at most, the teacher can clear away a space for belief, removing the obstacles which modern culture seems to have set up. For Otto, on the other hand, the development of the faculty of sensitivity to the numinous is ripe for positive intervention, through direct means such as the tone and demeanor of the teacher, via a “penetrative sympathy with what passes in the other person’s mind,” and especially through indirect means: appreciation and awareness of the sublime and the beautiful in art and architecture, in music and in mystery.

Education Toward Jewish Religious Experience

James’ and Otto’s explorations of the phenomena of religious experience may seem to have little to do with Jewish religious education; readers who have persevered to this point may be chafing at the ways in which James and Otto delegitimize phenomena central to normative conceptions of Judaism such as the study of Torah, or the performance of ethical or ritual mitzvah, or the cultivation of a sense of commandedness or covenant. At this point, it is worth articulating

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49 Holy, p. 60. Otto has in mind here narratives such as the sixth chapter of Isaiah. Notice the parallel, here, to James’ preference for narrative accounts of religious experience over abstract theological theorizing.

50 Holy, p. 61. This conception of indirect stirring of feelings is based on an earlier bit of Otto’s psychology, namely the so-called “Law of Associated Feelings” (Holy, pp. 42 ff.). According to this “law,” the feeling of one thing (say, the sublime) may “excite” or “pass over” into the feeling of another thing (say, the numinous). It is not the case that the former feeling becomes or evolves into the latter, but rather that it calls forth something which is already there, “already potentially planted there” (Holy, 44).

51 Thus, for example, Otto points toward the apparent centrality within liturgy of passages and prayers that are not understood. Apparently turning ignorance (on the part of the worshippers) and historical accident (accretions of prayers with no rational principle organizing them) into a virtue, he suggests that traditional services often possess something that reformed, rationalized services lack simply because of this element of the mysterious, which indirectly arouses the parallel feeling of the numinous. This might seem odd, but it is worth noting that parallel arguments on behalf of incomprehension were made in the debates over the proper language of Jewish prayer in the 1840s. It would be interesting, and not surprising, if they appeared in the debates over the language of Catholic liturgy in the twentieth century as well.

52 Holy, p. 60.
those concerns as clearly as possible. The models of “clearing space” or “evoking and awakening” may be all well and good for some religious contexts, but are they relevant to Judaism at all?

The first concern has to do with the individualism that is central to both these thinkers, a stance that seems at odds with the communitarian cadence of Jewish religiosity. James’ position is more extreme that Otto’s in this regard, but both prioritize the experience of the solitary individual, alone with the transcendent. The ideal, one might say, is face-to-face encounter, as it were; but employing the image of face-to-face—the image that is used to describe the encounter with the divine experienced by Moses and, in the tradition, by no other53—helps to clarify that individualism comprises at least three different aspects: social isolationism, a kind of religious elitism, and religious existentialism.

Social isolationism, in this context, is the idea that the truly religious individual has no need for a community or social environment, that the isolated experience on the mountaintop is the ideal religious experience. Perhaps one needs others as students, recipients of one’s teachings; but that is merely a duty that one has to fulfill as a result of the religious experience and the effects that it has. This image is not entirely unfamiliar from the Jewish tradition, but, at the same time, it seems to ignore the centrality of the covenantal community to Jewish religious experience. If the life of the community is nothing other than a life lived second-hand, as James believes, and if religious ritual is nothing other than the pathetic attempt to capture and concretize experiences that can never be so captured, perhaps it makes sense to dismiss the role of the community in religious experience. But if the performance of ritual is more meaningful than that—if we know or can imagine that it is precisely through the performance of ritual, either physically together with others or coordinated with them, that one arrives at the moments of deepest connection and even encounter with the transcendent—the ideal of social isolationism will seem alien.

A second idea contained within individualism is what one might call religious elitism. This is the idea that religious experience is available only to a select few, those with particularly profound religious sensitivities, a religious aristocracy. Thus, Moses may have had a face-to-face encounter, but the rest of us do not. Here James is quite a bit more at issue than Otto, for he explicitly dismisses from consideration the religious lives of any but the most extraordinary individuals. There are many such people, to be sure, and many examples of their testimony; but they are notable precisely because of how extreme they are, how different from normal human psychological experience. Once again, this kind of elitism is not entirely unfamiliar in the Jewish religious tradition; one thinks especially of Maimonides in this regard.54 This elitism may seem inconsistent, however, with a more democratic spirit in Jewish religious thought, especially under the influence of Hasidism, a sense that the achievement of religious ideals—spiritual ideals, if not intellectual or cognitive ideals—is available to even the simplest Jew.

Finally, though, we may identify a third aspect of individualism, religious existentialism—a focus on, and concern for, the meaning of religious rituals, texts and lives to the individuals who perform, study or enact them. Here the idea is that, ultimately, Moses’ experience of face-to-face encounter is the most important religious experience to him. One may contrast such an existentialism with an irreligious or atheistic alternative, of course, in which the meaning of one’s life to oneself might crowd out any concern for larger structures of responsibility. One may also contrast this sort of religious existentialism with a religious view that emphasizes the cosmic effects of the performance of ritual, regardless of ascribed or intended meaning—for example, a kabbalistic view about the cosmic effects of the performance of a mitzvah on the

53 This is not the place to go into biblical exegesis of Moses’ religious experience, but it is worth remembering that the central theophanic text in Exodus 33 asserts that Moses’ experience was not quite face-to-face. It is hardly coincidental that Soloveitchik encounters a presence standing behind him, rather than in front of him.

54 For an interesting contemporary discussion of Maimonides’ elitist intellectualism as an educational problem, see Michael Rosenak’s Road to the Palace (Bergahn Books, 1995).
release of a divine spark from its shell—or with a religious view that denies or diminishes the importance of any and all effects (whether on the individual performer or on the cosmos) and instead affirms obligation, unexplained and inexplicable.

In contrast, religious existentialism holds the individual at the center. Even if a community is important or indispensable for a religious life, it is still the case that the community is important to the individual; i.e., we understand religion, at least in part, as a matter of the individual. The idea of Sinai as a central aspect of the Jewish religious experience is, to be sure, an idea about an event with communal, indeed national, meaning; but at the same time, we also have the idea of each individual Jew standing at Sinai, enacting and embracing the covenant. Indeed, the entire enterprise of *ta’amei ha-mitzvot*, the inquiry into the meaning of the commandments, may be understood to support an individualistic approach to religion in this third aspect. In this sense at least, the worry about the individualism of James or Otto is misplaced. Jewish educators may well seek refuge in what was called above the “communitarian cadence” of Jewish religiosity too quickly and too easily; they may too casually avoid the question of the desired effects or impacts of ritual or communal activity on the spiritual lives of individual students. If James’ and Otto’s individualism can serve as a corrective, calling upon us to consider the ways in which Jewish involvement and observance might foster the fulfillment of the religious experience of individuals, then it should be welcomed.

Beyond the question of individualism in its several aspects, a second concern about the discussion of James and Otto involves the question of whether comparative religion is even possible as a coherent intellectual endeavor. Perhaps the attempt to find common patterns among testimony about religious experience forces James to focus too narrowly on features that lack the richness and particularity of specific and different religious traditions. This critique might be developed by noticing the absence of any interest on his part in Eastern religions, which might be taken as evidence that despite his rhetorical commitment to the psychology of human religious experience in general, he cannot avoid a bias toward those patterns of religious experience that conform to his own, perhaps highly Protestant, preconceived model. Otto, to his credit, was indeed concerned with a study of religious experience that is genuinely comparative, that does seek out distant models and patterns. In his case, however, perhaps the attempt to construct a common theoretical framework for the accounts of, and engagements with, the holy forces him toward abstraction over concreteness, generality over particularity. This concern should serve as a warning against simply adopting the implicit or explicit models of religious experience, and of the possibility for educating toward that experience, as a norm against which to measure Jewish religious educational theory or practice.

This concern about the intellectual coherence of the project of theory-building in comparative religion is not merely abstract and academic. Instead, we might point toward salient features of Jewish religiosity that fall outside of the models of scholars such as James or Otto. Two such salient features are, first, the experience of the encounter with texts of Torah and, second, the experience of ritual as not just obligatory or normative but as commanded. In each of these cases, a Jewish educator might wonder whether there is potential for Jewish religious experience that is genuine and profound and potentially transformative—a religious experience that transcends the mere performance of ritual, even when that ritual is accompanied by *kavanah*—but that does not conform to the norms set out by these scholars.

Concerning the first aspect, recall that Soloveitchik’s experience of a presence peering over his shoulder was not simply an experience of Torah study; it was an experience of something

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55 More precisely, the concern is not about comparative religion itself (one can always compare and contrast two different religious traditions), but rather about the effort to discern or construct some set of features that (all or most) religions have in common. As mentioned above (footnote 22), Steven Katz has pursued arguments to this effect, with regard to mysticism specifically, in “The Conservative Character of Mysticism” and elsewhere.
more, something distinct from study and standing in judgment of it. But elsewhere,\textsuperscript{56} he does indeed claim that the study of Torah is nothing other than an encounter with the divine, echoing the view attributed to Rabbi Yitzhak in BT Brachot 6a that “even one person who sits and occupies himself with Torah, the Divine Presence is with him.”\textsuperscript{57} On the view of James or Otto, it is hard to make sense of such claims, even as statements of aspiration rather than statements of fact. That is, even if we read the claim not as metaphysical truth about God’s presence but as an insight into the potential power of the intense study of Torah—even alone—\textsuperscript{58}—the study of Torah has to be interpreted as a means toward a religious experience that stands distinct from it.\textsuperscript{59} But this seems to misrepresent the claim. To say that the divine is present when one studies Torah is not the same as saying that studying Torah is a good way to achieve a religious experience; it is to say that studying Torah is the religious experience, in some sense. Such claims are hard to accommodate within the theoretical constructs of James and Otto. Even in the case of Soloveitchik’s testimony, it is hardly coincidental that Soloveitchik testifies to his experience as occurring in the context of study; one can hardly imagine it otherwise.\textsuperscript{60}

As for the second suggestion—the possibility of ritual that is not merely obligatory but commanded—that idea is most closely associated with another major Jewish theologian of the twentieth century, Franz Rosenzweig. His distinction between law (\textit{Gesetz}) and commandment (\textit{Gebot}) articulates the sense in which the performance of a ritual can fall short of representing, for the performer, a genuine encounter.\textsuperscript{61} But by demanding the transformation of \textit{Gesetz} into \textit{Gebot}, he maintains the possibility that ritual can become a genuine religious experience, as profound and potentially transformative as any conversion experience in James and any encounter with the holy in Otto. If one approaches the analysis of the ritual from the perspective of comparative religion, with its abstract categories, one might well miss such a central concept.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The preceding section attempted to articulate some of the concerns that might emerge from the encounter with James and Otto, grouped into two categories. The first category includes three different forms of individualism, calling attention to an implicit social isolationism, a religious elitism and a religious existentialism. The argument pursued there suggested that while the first two forms might indeed represent disjunctions between the phenomena of Judaism and the theorists’ construction of religious experience, the third might serve as an important reminder to educators about the central importance of \textit{meaning} as constructed by the religious individual.

\textsuperscript{56} See, for example, Soloveitchik, \textit{On Repentance}, p. 208.

\textsuperscript{57} The version at Mishnah Avot 3:6 attributes this teaching to Rabbi Halafta.

\textsuperscript{58} In light of the point above about the social-isolationism aspect of individualism, it is worth noting that the trajectory of the Talmudic passage is from the group to the individual: it is apparently more obvious or easy to understand that God would dwell among a group, in this conception, than that the divine would be present to an individual.

\textsuperscript{59} Alternatively, the construal of Torah study as religious experience might be rejected out of hand. Consider the following view: “Religious experience is…independent of specific theological commitments…. History gives ample evidence that persons with little or no theology…have had religious experience at virtually all levels of intensity. Indeed, it would appear that theology is fundamentally shaped by, flows from and derives its content from religious experience, rather than the other way around. The Bible, for example, is basically a record of a people’s religious experience over the centuries” (James Michael Lee, “Religious Instruction and Religious Experience,” in \textit{The Handbook of Religious Experience}, p. 537). There are only two phenomena in play here: experience and beliefs (theology); practices have no place at all. In fact, Lee’s de-contextualization of religious experience seems even more radical than James’ and Otto’s.

\textsuperscript{60} The point here is that even in the case about which Soloveitchik testifies, his experience is “prefigured,” to borrow Katz’s term (see footnote 22). In this case, the conception of Torah study as a locus for the divine presence prefigures the experience to which Soloveitchik testifies. This need not imply that the experience is false or a mere projection, but it does undermine the presumption that all religious experience is, at bottom, experience of the same object.

The second category of concerns, then, involves the presuppositions of the study of comparative religion, in general, and the question of its usefulness in any particular case. For in the case of Judaism, James and Otto seem to have no place for salient features of Jewish religiosity such as classical text study and commandedness. One is faced with a choice: either one diminishes the importance of these features on the basis of the general theoretical constructs, or one maintains the importance of the features and rejects (or at least modifies) the constructs.

Note, however, that the question which has served as the focus of this study has not been about religious experience in general, but about the specific question of educating toward such experience. So while we should not be blind to the limitations of applying James’ or Otto’s theoretical model to Jewish religiosity, we may also appreciate their potential contributions to our thinking about the educational challenge. In fact, Rosenzweig is helpful here beyond his famous distinction between Gesetz and Gebot, for in turning to him, we may hear an echo of some of the concerns about education toward religious experience that we noticed in James and Otto—and an echo, as well, of the possibilities.

The relevant discussion in Rosenzweig occurs in his “Towards a Renaissance of Jewish Learning” from 1920, which opens with a hyperbolic rejection of the culture of scholarship of Judaism, “the endless writing of books on Jewish subjects.” The revival of Jewish religious education, he asserts, will not occur through the written word; instead, “what we need more than ever…are human beings, Jewish human beings.” In place of concepts, he demands feelings; in place of rational articulations of the essence of Judaism, he calls for experience.

Later in the essay, he considers the most fundamental goals of Jewish education and how they might be achieved:

The unlimited cannot be attained through organization…. Any “plan” is wrong to begin with—simply because it is a plan. The highest things cannot be planned; for them readiness is everything.\(^6\)

To be sure, Rosenzweig has not named religious experience here as the goal, at least not in the sense of encounter with the transcendent or with “foundational reality.” He is not considering the conversionary experience, as in James, or the experience of the holy, as in Otto. In context, the goal is something like authentic individual Jewishness, helping people to become full or whole Jews. But the ideal that he upholds, when he refers to “the unlimited” and “the highest things,” demands an involvement of the whole self in one’s experience. It is also worth noting here that Rosenzweig is quite distant from a Jamesian denigration of received traditions. Nevertheless, for Rosenzweig, too, those traditions are second-hand, initially inauthentic until potentially transformed in one’s personal experience. When that transformation occurs, “what each will then see no one can venture to predict.”\(^6\)

He continues in this vein by announcing that the only legitimate recipe for the achievement of the highest goals in Jewish education “is to have no recipe.” Like James and Otto, Rosenzweig is suspicious of comprehensive religious prescriptions, either verbal recipes (dogmas) or practical recipes (rituals). But then, as if to rhetorically counter-balance his antinomianism, he appeals to “our fathers”: “Our fathers had a beautiful word for it that says everything: confidence. Confidence is the word for a state of readiness that does not ask for recipes....” In other words, lest one think that a rejection of recipes is tantamount to a rejection of the wisdom of the tradition, he avers that this is precisely what is meant by faith.

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63 On Jewish Learning, p. 65.

64 On Jewish Learning, p. 65.
As for the educators attempting to provide a religious education, Rosenzweig closes this section as follows:

Those who would help [the Jewish individual] can give him nothing but the empty forms of preparedness, which he himself and only he may fill. Who gives him more gives him less. Only the empty vessels in which something may happen may be kept in readiness—“time” and “space.” Really nothing more is needed—time to speak in, and space to speak in. This is all that can be “organized” in advance, and it is very little, next to nothing.

The humbleness of the role of the religious educator, in this picture, is unavoidable: All the educator can do is to arrange the setting, to modestly prepare the time and space for something to happen. The educator in this depiction can do a bit more than merely remove the barriers to genuine religious experience, as in James, but should not aspire to Otto’s indirect means of transmission of the numinous; the depiction is more concrete than “clearing out space” but less ambitious than “evoking and awakening.” Attempting to do more will fail; only the individual can fill these empty vessels for herself.

The picture that Rosenzweig presents here surely seems anathema to those who spend their time and energy thinking about and practicing Jewish education, planning curricula, training teachers, and striving to develop educational programs with intellectual integrity and spiritual substance. It makes all their efforts seem like so much busywork, so much frantic activity for so little gain. Surely the thoughtful and sensitive immersion of students within a tradition of scholarship, spiritual insight and meaningful observance requires painstaking efforts. Indeed, the “empty vessels” to be kept in readiness are not merely time and space, as Rosenzweig writes here, but by extension the whole complicated array of Jewish ritual and ethical practices as well as texts (as Rosenzweig himself later argues). The educator may arrange not just the furniture in the room, but the furniture of the mind. Yet, the exploration of James and Otto should remind us of the always incomplete nature of the religious education that one person can provide to another, and should serve as a warning of the potential for the idolatrous elevation of means over ends. Only when we keep these considerations in mind can we appreciate the potential to transform the practices of Judaism into profound religious experiences themselves, and the Rosenzweigian insistence that we do so.

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65 On Jewish Learning, p. 67.

66 This is the thrust of his well-known argument against his friend and collaborator Martin Buber, in his essay “The Builders,” addressed to Buber in 1923, also included in the collection On Jewish Learning.