

One Throne for Justice, One Throne for Mercy: The Radical Rabbinic Metaethic of a Value Pluralist God

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Introduction

This paper presents a number of Rabbinic traditions that attest to irresolvable conflicts between ethical values, such as between *Din* (justice) and *Rachamim* (mercy), or between *Emet* (truth) and *Shalom* (peace).¹² I argue that these traditions speak to a radical Rabbinic metaethical position³: that the universe is constructed around clashing super-values, producing such fundamental moral dilemmas that God Itself cannot arrive at resolution. This view stands in contrast to the mainstream metaethical paradigm of Value Monism and constitutes a uniquely Jewish precursor to Isaiah Berlin's theory of Value Pluralism. Toward illustrating these claims, I first introduce the philosophical concepts of Value Monism and Pluralism before turning to an exhibition and analysis of these fascinating Rabbinic texts.

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² When capitalized, Rabbinic refers to the classical Sages of the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods. Uncapitalized, it refers to rabbis more generally, including those of later epochs.

³ While ethics addresses what is moral, metaethics asks questions about the nature and structure of morality. Two people can agree that capital punishment is moral (an ethical position) while disagreeing on how to properly arrive at such a conclusion, in what contexts such determinations are even possible, and on the precise meaning and consequence of something being moral (all metaethical questions). In this paper, the critical metaethical question is whether there are one or multiple super-values, and it is conceptually independent of the ethical concern of what those super-value(s) actually are.

Framing the Concept: Value Monism & Pluralism in Western Metaethics

Contemporary moral philosophy distinguishes between *Value Monists* and *Value Pluralists*. The former envision moral codes in which all ethical values are precisely ranked, such that the code produces no contradicting or ambiguous directives. For Value Monists, there is one highest ranking core value—i.e. *super-value*—of which all other values in the system are but manifestations.⁴ Within this view, the ethical dilemmas that humans confront are only seemingly so—were one to achieve perfect moral wisdom (and have perfect knowledge of the facts at hand), the appropriate course of action would become immediately clear.⁵

Value Monism is a widespread, even intuitive, ethical perspective. Anyone who engages in debate around a moral dilemma (instead of throwing up their hands in immediate resignation) presumes the possibility of a solution. They invoke counterexamples and parallel cases with the hope of uncovering some generalizable higher ranking value that, here too, shall offer resolution.

⁴ Theoretically, that single super-value can itself be composite, so long as its multiple parts are themselves clearly ranked and non-overlapping. Consider the following proposed super-value principle: “do unto others as you would have done unto you, except when doing so threatens your own life or limb, in which case do unto others whatever best preserves your own health.” Although it references both altruism and self-preservation, the principle explicitly demarcates when each applies, and there is no room for internal contradiction. As such, it represents a unified (though complicated) proposed super-value. See as well n. 8.

⁵ For example, consider the well-known Talmudic debate regarding two stranded travellers with a flask of water sufficient to maintain only one life (BT Bava Metzia 62a) or the horrific Tannaitic case of sacrificing one captive woman to spare her fellow abductees (M Terumot 8:12). The dilemma is clear: do we value self-preservation, the imperative to not stand idly by, or perhaps the principle of avoiding complicity in another’s suffering? Each of these desires represents a valid moral interest, sufficient to guide our actions in less complicated scenarios. Here, however, the three conflict and resolving such dilemmas requires privileging one value over the others. For such prioritizing to be reasoned rather than arbitrary, we need identify a “higher value” against which to assess and rank these lower values. We must ask: Why are these our values? Are avoiding complicity or self-preservation themselves inherent goods, or are they only ethical in that they tend to instantiate some higher value? Are there parallel cases in which either is discounted for the sake of a different good? What does that higher good dictate in these specific cases? In comparing hypothetical cases and searching for consistency, we might conclude that not standing idly by and that avoiding complicity are only valuable as a means towards self-preservation, viz., from debilitating pangs of guilt (a view not shared by this author). Applying that conclusion to the dilemma at hand, we would rank the choices by which best serves our self-preservation and decide accordingly. If we find multiple and conflicting higher values at play, we would subject them to the same analysis until a single super-value is finally located. For Value Monists, this process may be curtailed by limits to our intellect and information, but a perfectly reasoned and informed mind can always begin with some apparent values and work its way up to a higher value and eventual solution.

In doing so, they expect their interlocutor to share the same basic presumption: there is a clear moral order out there; our task is merely to find and apply it.

Indeed, this has been the ultimate mission of over two thousand years of Western ethical philosophy. To this day, the three major approaches in normative ethics—Utilitarianism, Deontology, and Virtue Ethics—all seek the same end: the unification of many apparent values under one super-value. Towards that goal, Jeremy Bentham famously proposed the maximization of human pleasure as the super-value; Kant offered the Categorical Imperative; and Aristotle submitted as essential the individual's cultivation of *eudaimonia*.^{6,7} Within the world of Jewish religious thought, a Value Monist paradigm seems to animate Hillel's famous distillation of the Torah ethic: "What you dislike, don't do to your friend; this is the entire Torah and the rest is commentary."⁸ It likewise seems to motivate Maimonides⁹ and Luzzato¹⁰ in each proposing a singular "object of the Law" or "object of one's effort" that motivates and justifies the performance of all Torah directives. Like their Western counterparts, these three Jewish voices seek to unify an entire ethical system under one guiding super-value.

In contrast, Value Pluralists conceive of moral codes with two or more super-values, all sharing the same "top of the pack" ranking and none capable of overriding the others. When these super-values conflict, there is little else to do but recognize the tension and acknowledge that moral wisdom offers no clear answer. In such situations, Value Pluralists argue, the philosophical hunt for a clear moral directive becomes futile—not because we are intellectually

⁶ Alternately translated as flourishing, living well, or happiness. See n. 6.

⁷ A more precise and complete account of each of these major theories is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁸ BT Shabbat 31a.

⁹ Maimonides, Moses. *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:27. As per n. 3, note that Maimonides' proposed object is a complex, though fully unified, principle.

¹⁰ Luzzato, Moshe Chaim. *Mesilat Yesharim* 1:1.

limited in our pursuit of this target, but because the target simply doesn't exist. That said, when the various super-values concur in their response to a particular case, ethical dilemmas may be resolved. For this reason, Value Pluralism should not be confused with Moral Nihilism, which proposes zero super-values, nor with radical Moral Relativism, which suggests an infinite array. For Value Pluralists, a morality exists and offers clear directives, even if it sometimes produces moments of inherent and irresolvable contradiction.

The Value Pluralist paradigm gives grounds to those who feel confident when confronting certain moral questions yet feel lost or “torn asunder” in the face of particular ethical quandaries. It likewise explains why so many essential dilemmas remain unresolved, and why the problem seems somehow grander than a search for more facts or better arguments. Once a moral question cuts deep enough—once it touches on conflicting super-values—resolution is indeed impossible. At some point, there really is nothing left to do other than acknowledge the pull of two contradictory poles, make a relatively arbitrary decision, and move on.

While hinted at by early writers, Value Pluralism entered formal philosophical discourse in the work of Isaiah Berlin—particularly in his analyses of the divergent political values of liberty and equality.¹¹ (Berlin himself later attributed the theory to James Fitzjames Stephen.¹²) Over the course of his writings, he identifies those ethical actors who “seek for final solutions and all-embracing systems” and acknowledges that their “Monism and faith in a single criterion has always proved a deep source of satisfaction both to the intellect and to the emotions.” But he nevertheless concludes:

¹¹ While references to the paradigm appear even in Berlin's undergraduate output, his first systematic account appears in *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958) available in *Liberty*. Henry Hardy (ed.), Oxford and New York (2002). For a detailed description of the theory's evolution over Berlin's career, see Cherniss, Joshua and Hardy, Henry. "Isaiah Berlin". *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition). Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

¹² See Blattberg, Charles. "An Exchange with Professor Sir Isaiah Berlin" (1996). The Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust.

The belief that some single formula can in principle be found whereby all the diverse ends ... can be harmoniously realised is demonstrably false ... [Rather,] they are in perpetual rivalry with each other. To assume that all values can be graded on one scale, so that it is a mere matter of inspection to determine the highest, seems to me to falsify our knowledge that men are free agents, to represent moral decision as an operation which a slide-rule could, in principle, perform.¹³

For Berlin, Value Monism is a comforting but false faith. In its place, we must accept the “perpetual rivalry” of multiple values not as an inconvenience waiting to be remedied, but inherent to morality itself. Ultimately, he portrays the contradictions within our values as:

Of the essence of what they are and what we are. If we are told that these contradictions will be solved in some perfect world in which all good things can be harmonised in principle, then we ... must say ... that is a world altogether beyond our ken; that principles which are harmonised in this other world are not the principles with which, in our daily lives, we are acquainted; if they are transformed, it is into conceptions not known to us on earth. But it is on earth that we live, and it is here that we must believe and act.¹⁴

Berlin is unequivocal: the moral world in which human beings reside contains multiple, irresolvable core values.

But the above citation also points to an important limit in Berlin’s personal brand of Value Pluralism. In general, Berlin tended toward the view (known as Moral Constructivism) that values do not reside “out there” as some pre-existing part of reality—waiting to be deduced or discovered by human minds—but are instead human constructions.¹⁵ As such, his Value

¹³ *Two Concepts of Liberty*, pp. 214-216.

¹⁴ “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, Henry Hardy (ed.), Princeton (2013), pp. 13-14.

¹⁵ Moral Constructivism maintains that there are normative, binding ethical truths, but that they are arrived at by turning inward and contemplating what specific agents would agree to under particular circumstances. This is in contrast to Moral Realism, which conceives of some kind of natural law, Divine mandate, or other metaphysical reality to which we must turn for the “discovery” of ethical truths.

Pluralism is fundamentally a description of the human mind and experience, and an account for why so many dilemmas persist within our constructed ethical systems.

However, a far bolder version of Value Pluralism is also available: that an objective moral system exists, encoded into the universe itself, that contains multiple super-values. It is precisely this radical view—that there is an objective ethic, just with inherent and irresolvable contradiction built in—that finds powerful expression in a sizable strand of Rabbinic thought.¹⁶

Value Pluralism in Rabbinic Literature

The Rabbis of the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods composed no formal studies in philosophy. Nevertheless, within the legal and narrative compositions that define their oeuvre, positions on matters moral, theological, and political often inform the discourse. A philosophically oriented reader finds ripe material, transmitted through the complexities of the *Halakha* (Jewish law) and the poetry of the *Aggada* (Rabbinic narrative).

This paper highlights one common Aggadic trope—the conflict between Divine values like *Rachamim* (mercy), *Din* (justice), and *Emet* (truth)—as evidence of a firm Rabbinic tradition of Value Pluralism. Of course, the consistent reference to a values clash does not itself constitute a notable philosophical streak. What sets these Aggadot apart is their depiction of such clashes as inherent to the very fabric of the created universe, unaffected by access to infinite knowledge, and absolutely irresolvable. Admittedly, terms like “Pluralism” or “irresolvable” never appear in these Rabbinic texts, and yet, through the Rabbis’ colorful narration, the claims shine through.

¹⁶ The Rabbinic view that follows is almost certainly a form of Moral Realism (see n. 14). Nonetheless, I avoid labeling it as such in the body of this paper from a consideration that, technically speaking, we could include God and God’s angels as “specific agents” within the ethical system, and thus cast these Rabbinic texts as presuming a novel form of Moral Constructivism. That possibility is beyond the scope of this paper, and I instead emphasize that, either way, God and God’s angels represent an ethical voice that is “out there” and “objective” from the perspective of human agents.

Over and over again, the Rabbis cast mercy, justice, and other values as cosmic entities set in conflict, project profound ethical indecision on the Holy One Itself,¹⁷ and refuse to offer any hope for clean resolution. In effect, they portray a moral universe characterized by multiple values set in tension—the very essence of Value Pluralism.

There is no stronger example than this Aggadic depiction of God encountering an ethical dilemma most consequential: whether to create humankind. The following appears in Genesis Rabba 8:5.^{18,19}

אמר ר' סימון בשעה שבא הקב"ה לבראות אדם הראשון נעשו מלאכי השרת כיתים וחבורות, מהם אומרים יברא, מהם אומרים אל יברא ה"ה חסד ואמת נפגשו צדק ושלום נשקו, חסד אומר יברא שהוא גומל חסדים, אמת אומר אל יברא שכולו שקר, צדק אומר יברא שעושה צדקות, שלום אומר אל יברא דכוליה קטט, מה עשה הקב"ה נטל אמת והשליכה לארץ, אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקב"ה רבון העולמים מה את מבזה אלטיכסייה שלך, תעלה אמת מן הארץ ה"ה אמת מארץ תצמח

R. Simon said: When the Holy One came to create the First Human, the Ministering Angels formed factions and groups. Some said, “Let it be created!” Others said, “Don't let it be created!”

That is the meaning of the verse, “Kindness and truth are met together, charity and peace have kissed” (Ps 85:11).²⁰ Kindness said, Let it be created, for it will perform kindness! But Truth said, Don't let it be created, for it is entirely falsehood! Charity said, Let it be created, for it will do charity! Peace said, Don't let it be created, for it is entirely violence!

So what did the Holy One do? He picked up Truth and cast it on the earth! The Ministering Angels said before the Holy One: Master of the Universe! How can you debase Your very crown! Bring Truth back up from the earth! That is what [the very next verse] means: “Truth springs out of the earth, while charity gazes down from heaven.”

This imaginative Aggada neatly contains all the components necessary to express a

¹⁷ I utilize a capitalized “It” or “You” as a neuter pronoun for God, in my own composition as well as in my translation of Rabbinic texts.

¹⁸ All Genesis Rabba citations are from *Genesis Rabba*. Hanoch Albech (ed.) Jerusalem (1936).

¹⁹ All translations are my own.

²⁰ I here translate *Tzeddaka* as charity not in the sense of alms, but of the virtue of being charitable. “Righteousness” is an alternative translation, but strikes me as both too vague for this context and not a reasonable foil to peace. See n. 20.

robust Value Pluralism. First, the Rabbis cast kindness, truth, charity, and peace as more than merely human values. Instead, they are elevated beyond human experience into the Divine Retinue and personified (deified?) with speaking roles at this Heavenly focus group. Second, those values conflict, with that disagreement producing an ethical dilemma. Third, no higher value is invoked to adjudicate this dispute, or additional line of argument prepared. God, presumably an agent invested with at least substantial intelligence, does not even attempt to settle the dispute analytically. Instead, all the attributes are taken as super-values, with inherent, uncontested, but conflicting worth. Fourth, the decision making process is arbitrary, even violent. Here, the Rabbis depict that chaos through the image of God seizing one claimant and physically tossing it out of bounds. Only through violence—the random imposition of one’s will—is a clear ethical choice possible. Fifth, note that truth is only temporarily pushed aside. Truth’s rejection does not suggest a lower status in the hierarchy of values, for it soon returns to ornament the Godhead, re-taking its position as one of many contradictory values with which the Holy One operates. Lastly, placing the creation of humankind as the setting for this value conflict implies a unique human pedigree, in which our very origin is bound up in the reality of multiple super-values. Taken together, this Aggadah’s depiction of multiple Heavenly values set in irresolvable tension, from which decisions—even by the Divine—are unreasoned, moment-specific, and yet somehow responsible for human existence, loudly attests to a robust Value Pluralistic metaethic.

But violence is not the only tool in the hand of a God managing multiple super-values. In two alternative accounts of humankind's creation (ibid 8:4, 8:6), the Rabbis illustrate Value Pluralism through narratives climaxing in God’s willful ignorance and brash spontaneity:

ר' חנינא לא אמר כן, אלא בשעה שבא לבראות את אדם הראשון נמלך במלאכי השרת, אמר להם נעשה אדם, אמרו לו מה טיבו, אמר להם צדיקים עומדים ממנו ה"ה כי יודע י"י דרך צדיקים כי הודיע י"י דרך צדיקים למלאכי השרת, ודרך רשעים תאבד איבדה מהם, גילה להם שהצדיקים עומדים ממנו ולא גילה להם שהרשעים עומדים ממנו, שאילו גילה להם שהרשעים עומדים ממנו לא היתה מידת הדין נותנת שיברא....

ר' הונא רבא דציפורי אמר עד שמלאכי השרת מדיינין אלו עם אלו, מתעסקים אלו עם אלו בראו הקב"ה, אמר להם מה אתם מועילים כבר נעשה אדם.

But R. Hanina said differently:

When God came to create the First Human, It consulted with the Ministering Angels. It said to them, “Shall We make the human?” They said to It, What is its character? It said to them: Righteous ones will rise from it.²¹ This is what it means, “For the Lord knows the path of the righteous” (Ps. 1:6), for the Lord informed the Ministering Angels of the path of the righteous [viz. their emergence from the First Human]. “But the path of the wicked will be lost” (Ps. 1:6, continued)—God made it lost from them. It revealed to them that righteous ones will rise from the human, but It did not reveal to them that wicked ones would rise from the human. For had God revealed to them that wicked ones would rise from it, the Attribute of Justice would never have allowed the human to be created.

...

R. Huna, rabbi of Tzippori, said:

While the Ministering Angels were all debating each other, all getting into it with each other, the Holy One created the human. God said to them: What's the use, the human is already made!

Both accounts extend the thread of a Divine entity unable to straightforwardly resolve the conflict between multiple super-values. In the first passage, the dilemma's weight is emphasized through God's reliance on enforced ignorance. The moral universe is so ordered—the Rabbis believe—that God must hide from Its own values in order to forge ahead. In the second, the dilemma is dramatized through the image of a riotous angelic debate. Here, the contrast between the decisive God and the quarreling angels lends the narrative its dramatic power. It is only by “executive decision”—full of finality but absent of reason—that God can move past an angelic body fueled by argument but condemned to be inconclusive. Additionally, note how in both

²¹ In this context, I prefer translating *Tzaddikim* as righteous ones, not charitable ones, primarily because it is a better contrast to *Reshaim*, wicked ones. See n. 19.

narratives, the decision provides for a brief course of action but does not resolve the underlying conflict. The Attribute of Justice would still “never allow the humans to be created” and the Ministering Angels remain heatedly divided over what would have been the proper course of action. The problem has been avoided, but never resolved. Ultimately, these two texts portray a Value Pluralist universe, in which God Itself responds to conflicting super-values not with strident moral philosophizing, but with the abandonment thereof. Even the Holy One, it seems, cannot reason out of these quandaries.

But without a firm basis for Its decision, how is the Holy One to decide? This problem finds poignant expression in a most theologically remarkable Aggada. Located at BT Berachot 7a,²² it asserts that God, much like human beings, prays.

א"ר יוחנן משום ר' יוסי מנין שהקב"ה מתפלל שנאמר והביאותים אל הר קדשי ושמחתים בבית תפלתי תפלתם לא נאמר אלא תפלתי מכאן שהקב"ה מתפלל. מאי מצלי אמר רב זוטרא בר טוביה אמר רב יה"ר מלפני שיכבשו רחמי את כעסי ויגולו רחמי על מדותי ואתנהג עם בני במדת רחמים ואכנס להם לפני משורת הדין. תניא א"ר ישמעאל בן אלישע פעם אחת נכנסת להקטיר קטורת לפני ולפנים וראיתי אכתריאל יה"ה צבאות שהוא יושב על כסא רם ונשא ואמר לי ישמעאל בני ברכני אמרתי לו יה"ר מלפניך שיכבשו רחמיך את כעסך ויגולו רחמיך על מדותיך ותתנהג עם בניך במדת הרחמים ותכנס להם לפני משורת הדין ונענע לי בראשו

R. Yohanan said in the name of R. Yose:

How do we know that the Holy One prays? It is said, “I will bring them to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My prayer house” (Is 56:7)—it doesn't say *their* prayer, but *My* prayer. From here [we infer] that the Holy One prays.

But what does It pray?

R. Zutra b. Tuvia said that Rav said:

May it be My will that My mercy conquers my anger and My mercy reigns over My attributes and I deal with my children through the attribute of mercy, and I enter toward them from beyond the rule of justice.²³

It was taught, R. Yishmael b. Elisha said:

One time I entered Beyond the Beyond [i.e. the Holy Holies] to burn incense, and I saw Aqatrial-Yah Lord of the Divine Retinue sitting on the lofty exalted Throne. It rose and said to me: Yishmael, my child, bless me.

²² All Talmud citations are from the standard Vilna edition.

²³ Why justice is sometimes paired in Rabbinic texts with mercy and other times paired with charity, as well as the general questions of which particular attributes appear in which contexts and of their precise relation to each other, are all worthwhile inquiries outside the scope of this paper.

I said, May it be Your will that Your mercy conquers Your anger and Your mercy reigns over Your attributes and You deal with Your children through the attribute of mercy, and enter towards them from beyond the rule of justice.
And It nodded Its head back at me.

In this bold Rabbinic tradition, prayer—the recourse of the vulnerable as it grasps for the powerful—is transposed onto God. Similarly, the *Baruch* (The Blessed One) suddenly finds itself soliciting the blessings of others. In transmitting this narrative, the Rabbis are effectively asking, in what ways does God remain just as impotent as Its creations? Their answer is clear: It too cannot fully cope with the contradictory super-values of justice and mercy. Both values are attributes of God; both are legitimate modes through which to approach God’s children. While God clearly prefers mercy (at least in Its aspirational prayer-life) that token inclination is insufficient to guarantee which attribute will rule the day. (Indeed, some Rabbinic sources imagine moments of triumph for the attribute of justice.²⁴) An expression of powerlessness before embarking on an ethical decision, God’s prayer reveals the awesome difficulty in navigating two equally legitimate super-values. And in describing that decision with the rhetoric of violent “conquest”—not unlike the image of Truth violently thrown aside—God’s prayer reminds us that the choice will ultimately take the form not of a peaceful resolution, but a chaotic fiat.

With a God sometimes beholden to one attribute yet, arbitrarily, sometimes manifesting another, can Value Pluralist Rabbis speak of a truly unified Deity? This question emerges in BT Chagiga 14a’s instantly controversial claim that Divine Kingship rests on two separate thrones:

כתוב אחד אומר כרסיה שביבין דינור וכתוב אחד אומר עד די כרסון רמיו ועתיק יומין יתיב
לא קשיא אחד לו ואחד לדוד כדתניא אחד לו ואחד לדוד דברי ר' עקיבא אמר לו ר' יוסי

²⁴ For an apparent prayer for God to move away from mercy and towards justice, see *Otzar HaMidrashim*, Yehuda Eisenstein (ed.), Jerusalem (1915), “Aseret Melachim”, p. 465. For a moment when God is described as having done just that, see *Midrash Agadda*, Solomon Buber (ed.), Vienna (1894), Deuteronomy 1.

הגלילי עקיבא עד מתי אתה עושה שכינה חול אלא אחד לדין ואחד לצדקה קיבלה מיניה או לא קיבלה מיניה ת"ש אחד לדין ואחד לצדקה דברי רבי עקיבא אמר לו ר"א בן עזריה עקיבא מה לך אצל הגדה כלך מדברותיך אצל נגעים ואהלות אלא אחד לכסא ואחד לשרפרף כסא יושב עליו שרפרף להדום רגליו שנאמר השמים כסאי והארץ הדום רגלי

One verse says, “his throne [singular] was fiery flame” (Dan 7:9, end) while the other says, “until thrones [plural] were placed and an Ancient of Days sat” (Dan 7:9, beginning). But there is no contradiction: One throne is for God, while the other is for David.

As it was taught: One for God and the other for David, these are the words of R. Akiva. But R. Yose HaGelili said: Akiva, how long will you profane the Divine Presence! Rather, one throne is for justice and the other is for charity.²⁵

Did R. Akiva concede or not? It was taught: One is for justice and the other is for charity, these are the words of R. Akiva. [Apparently, he conceded.] R. Eliezer b. Azaria said: Akiva, what do you know about Aggada?! Have you moved on from all your words on [Halakhic topics like] *Tzaraat* and *Ohelot*?!²⁶ Rather, one is the chair of the throne and one is the ottoman of the throne. The chair is for sitting upon and the ottoman is for a footrest. As it says, “The Heavens are my throne and the earth is my footstool” (Is 61:1).

The Rabbis are quite vocally aware of the theological problems that a “second” Divine throne may raise. Is (the Messianic King) David sharing authority with the Lord up in Heaven? Is there a separate worship for the God whose rule rests on a throne of charity, and the God whose rule rests on a throne of justice? Do they advocate different Divine writs? R. Yose’s furious rejection of R. Akiva, and R. Eliezer’s heavy criticism of them both reveals the anxiety apparent in any conversation about a second Divine throne.

But it is a conversation that nonetheless persists, and R. Yose’s (and later, R. Akiva’s) view boldly depicts a Value Pluralist God. The super-values of charity and justice are so essential that they embody elements of the Divine, but so incompatible that they rend Divine unity across two chairs.

²⁵ This paper’s title references the “throne for mercy” and not what appears in this passage, “throne for charity”. The former term is clearly a close relative of the latter (it too appears as a foil to the “throne of justice” in Rabbinic passages, e.g. ◌BT Avoda Zara 3b) and though not cited in the body of this paper, it is a far more common and recognizable rabbinic expression.

²⁶ Both are notably abstract areas of Halakha dealing with ritual impurity, each with a full tractate in the Mishna devoted to their analysis.

If justice and mercy (or, in this phrasing, charity) are depicted as an indispensable duality Above, it is reasonable to imagine them as inhering in the created world Below. A God with two thrones may indeed create a world intermixed with two features. We close with such an account, from Genesis Rabba 12:15:

ה' אלהים. למלך שהיו לו כוסות ריקים, אמר המלך אם אני נותן לתוכן חמין הם מתבקעין, צונן הם מקריסין. ומה עשה המלך? ערב חמין בצונן ונתן בהם ועמדו. כך אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: אם בורא אני את העולם במדת הרחמים, הוי חטייה סגיאין. במדת הדין היאך העולם יכול לעמוד? אלא, הרי אני בורא אותו במדת הדין ובמדת הרחמים, והלואי יעמוד.
“The Lord, God” (Gen 2:4).²⁷ It is like a king that had empty cups. The king said, If I put hot water in them, they'll split open; cold water and they'll buckle. So what did the king do? He mixed the hot water with the cold and put it in the cups, and they endured. So too did the Holy One, Blessed be He, say: If I create the world with the attribute of mercy, there will be too much sin; with the attribute of justice, then how will it possibly endure?! Rather, I shall create it with the attribute of justice and the attribute of mercy, and hopefully (*halevai*) it will endure!

Here, justice and mercy are conceived as primordial ingredients of the human ecosystem. But note that it is not their separation or conflict, but blended coexistence, which the Rabbis highlight as essential to created reality. More than just essential, the fusing of justice and mercy is strictly necessary: with only one, the world buckles or splits open. To insist that only one of these attributes undergirds the universe, or qualifies as a super-value, is to disregard the complexity that God Itself felt obligated to embed within creation. Ours is a world formed from the coexistence of disparate ethical super-values and, to paraphrase Isaiah Berlin, it is in that world which we live, and it is in that world that we must believe and act.

Concluding Personal Remarks

²⁷ The Aggadic commentary apparently take its inspiration from the appearance of the double name “the Lord, God” during the Biblical creation story, and the implication that there were two separate modes of the Divine present for the world’s formation.

Conflict between core values is a fundamental feature of my moral life. Tradition versus innovation, communalism versus universalism, self-sacrifice versus self-realization, self-defense versus compassion: the answers for myself and for my Jewish community remain unclear. The ethical life, it seems, occurs within the gray. I am often tempted to experience these moral conflicts as a kind of confusion— if only I had the “right” answer, if only I “knew” better. But the image of God struggling to balance core values, and of the created world itself embedded with such contradiction and co-mingling, means that the sense of irresolvability is the product of a right knowledge. We are correct—we are truthful observers of reality—when we recognize the value conflicts inherent in our universe.

But the Rabbinic expression of Value Pluralism is more than an account of clashing human values. First and foremost, it is an account of God—and one which I see as deeply compelling. I struggle to receive a God who offers all the answers and acts with perfect consistency. My own encounters with God are varied and uncertain—marked at times by a feeling of love, and at others by awe; at times by a zen closeness, at others by a Maimonidean distance; by a faith in the justice that must be embedded somewhere in this universe, and a hopelessness that evil still prevails. In other words, mine is a God who rules from many thrones. And when I pursue the Holy One, the question is not only how to find God, but *which* shall I work to discover. A God who rules from many thrones is one that I can bless to occupy the “right” one; a God who is still deciding, within the unchanging reality of cosmic contradiction, Its own nature. We, the Jewish people, can urge God to be that better God—the one that we today deserve and accept. The prayer of the Value Pluralist God, recorded in BT Berachot 7a, still stands at the center of the traditional Rosh Hashana Mussaf: “May Your Mercy conquer Your Anger.” In other words, May You become the God we need You to be. Mercy, anger,

justice, and truth: all are viable possibilities, and the Divine will somehow choose between them. But one hope of Rabbinic Value Pluralism is that God—in that Talmudic image now sung aloud in *Anim Zemirot*—will heed not just our personal prayers, but also “nod Its head at our blessing.”