

The Concept of Freedom in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses



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In Cooperation with
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The Concept of Freedom in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

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Preface

The present volume contains the results of a conference on the concept of freedom in Judaism, Christianity and Islam held at the Friedrich-Alexander University in Erlangen on May 10 – 11, 2017. The conference was organized by the Research Unit “Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses” (KCID) in cooperation with the Hanns-Seidel-Foundation.

The Research Unit KCID offers an innovative approach for studying the development of the three interconnected religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. With this aim in mind, KCID analyzes the history of ideas in each of these three religions, always taking into account the history of interreligious exchange and appropriation of these very ideas. In doing so, KCID investigates the foundations of religious thought, thereby establishing an “archaeology of religious knowledge” in order to make manifest certain commonalities and differences between the three religions via dialogic study of their conceptual history. Thus, KCID intends to contribute to an intensive academic engagement with interreligious discourses in order to uncover mutually intelligible theoretical foundations and increase understanding between these different religious communities in the here and now. Moreover, KCID aims to highlight how each religion’s self-understanding can contribute to mutual understanding and peace between the three religious communities in the world.

In order to explore key concepts in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, KCID organizes conferences individually dedicated to specific concepts. A renowned set of researchers from various disciplines explore these concepts from the viewpoint of all three religions. The results of each conference are published in a volume appearing in the book series “Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses”. Particularly salient selections from each volume are made available online in Arabic, English and German.

In this fashion, KCID fulfills its aspirations not only by reflecting on central religious ideas amongst a small group of academic specialists, but also by disseminating such ideas in a way that will appeal to the broader public. Academic research that puts itself at the service of society is vital in order to counteract powerful contemporary trends toward a form of segregation rooted in ignorance. Mutual respect and acceptance amongst religious communities is thereby strengthened. Such a result is guaranteed due to the methodology deployed by the research unit, namely the dialogic investigation of the history of concepts as documented in the present volume.

We wish to thank all of those who put their efforts into organizing the conference and producing the volume: Dr. Philipp Hildmann from the Hanns-Seidel-

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Erlangen and Munich in February 2019
The Editors

Table of Contents

Kenneth Seeskin

The Concept of Freedom in Judaism — 1

Nico Vorster

The Concept of Freedom in Christianity — 45

Maha El Kaisy-Friemuth

The Concept of Freedom in Islam — 101

Georges Tamer and Katja Thörner

Epilogue — 147

List of Contributors and Editors — 159

Index of Persons — 161

Index of Subjects — 165

Kenneth Seeskin

The Concept of Freedom in Judaism

In Judaism, the first commandment of the Decalogue reads: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”¹ What is noteworthy about this commandment is the way God introduces himself: not as a metaphysically perfect being, not as creator of heaven and earth, but as a liberator – the one who freed Israel from the grips of Pharaoh. Given the prominence of this commandment, freedom from slavery is not only the central theme of the Passover holiday, known in Judaism as *zman herutaynu* (the season of our freedom), it is a central theme of the Sabbath as well. In fact, if you engage in daily prayer, you cannot live a single day of your life without recalling it.

It could be said therefore that liberation from slavery is the formative event in all of Judaism. In the words of Michael Walzer: “The Exodus is a story, a big story, one that became part of the cultural consciousness of the West ...”² It has been invoked by revolutionaries ranging from German peasants to Oliver Cromwell to the American colonists to Martin Luther King.³ Along these lines, it is also noteworthy that the Liberty Bell, which sits in Philadelphia and symbolizes American independence from Great Britain, is inscribed with the words “Proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof” a reference to Leviticus 25:10, which announces the Jubilee year when slaves were to be freed, debts forgiven, and land returned to its original owner.⁴ Indeed, Deuteronomy 30:19, the rhetorical climax of the Torah, contains a rousing affirmation of free choice: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life – if you and your offspring would live.”

Against this celebration of freedom, the standard Christian critique of Judaism is that no sooner were the Israelites freed from Egyptian bondage than they were subjected to another form: bondage to a distant, unapproachable God who insists on strict obedience to law.

1 Note that Judaism normally parses the Ten Commandments differently than Christianity. For Jewish thinkers, “I am the Lord thy God ...” is usually taken as a commandment to accept the sovereignty of God even though it is not expressed in the form of an imperative. Cf., for example, Maimonides, Moses, *Mishneh Torah 1*, trans. E. Touger, New York/Jerusalem: Moznaim Publishing, 1989, Basic Laws, 1. 1–6.

2 Walzer, Michael, *Exodus and Revolution*, New York: Basic Books, 1985, 7.

3 Ibid., 3–7.

4 It is unclear whether the Jubilee year was an aspiration or a report of an actual practice.

Along these lines, it is noteworthy that the Hebrew word for slavery (*avduth*) comes from the same root as the word for service to or worship of God. Strictly speaking if God freed Israel from Egyptian bondage, then by all rights, Israel would be bound to God as a result.

As enlightened a figure as Kant argued that Judaism is not a religious faith in the true sense of the term because it is concerned merely with the outward performance of statutory laws, takes no interest in their moral significance, and leaves the inner life of the person, including his feelings and intentions, undressed.⁵ If this is true, then it is not until the emergence of Christianity that genuine freedom became possible. In the words of Paul (Gal 3:23–24): “Before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law ... therefore the law was our disciplinarian [*paidagogos*] before Christ came ...”⁶

Like Islam, Judaism is a religion of law. Although there have been attempts to introduce articles of faith to Judaism, the most notable being that of Moses Maimonides, Moses Mendelssohn was right in saying that articles of faith have always been controversial and have never attained what might be considered official status.⁷ Soon after Maimonides introduced his version of them, some people questioned how many he himself was committed to. From a religious point of view, the absence of articles of faith is not necessarily a bad thing. As Kant pointed out, nothing is gained if statutory laws are replaced by statutory beliefs: beliefs one must accept without supporting evidence or rational justification.⁸ It is in this spirit that Mendelssohn referred to articles of faith as “shackles of faith.”

Even a cursory look at the history of Jewish thought will show that without articles of faith to rein them in, Jewish thinkers have given themselves enormous latitude in choosing systems of thought within which to craft their theories. There have been Jewish Platonists, Aristotelians, voluntarists, Averroists, Spinoz-

5 Kant, Immanuel, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. Allen Wood/George Di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 6:125–27.

6 The *paidagogos* was someone assigned to look after young boys for the purpose keeping them out of trouble.

7 Cf. his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, “Sanhedrin, Chapter Ten.” For a readily available English translation, cf. Maimonides, Moses, *A Maimonides Reader*, Isadore Twersky (ed.), New York: Behrman House, 1972, 402–23. For discussion of Maimonides’ principles as well as their reception by other Jewish thinkers, cf. Kellner, Menachem, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought*, New York: Littman Library, 1986 and idem, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*, New York: Littman Library, 2006. Even in Maimonides’ lifetime, a controversy arose over how deeply he himself was committed to these principles, especially Number 13: belief in resurrection. For Moses Mendelssohn’s critique of Maimonides, cf. *Jerusalem*, trans. Alan Arkush, Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1983, 100–1.

8 Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:166, footnote.

ists, Kantians, Hegelians, Marxists, existentialists, realists, idealists, and almost anything else one could name. In the words of Joseph Albo (1380–1444): “It is clear now that every intelligent person is permitted to investigate the fundamental principles of religion and to interpret the biblical texts in accordance with the truth as it seems to him.”⁹

What I propose to do is to look at the concept of freedom in Judaism by examining five central themes: the giving of law, Sabbath observance, repentance, freedom of thought, and messianism. In addition to the biblical text, I will examine a prominent thinker from the middle ages, early modern period, and twentieth century: Maimonides, Spinoza, and Hermann Cohen.

It should come as no surprise that in looking at freedom from so many different perspectives, more than one understanding of it will emerge. It is customary for philosophers to distinguish freedom in a negative sense, i.e. lack of external constraint, from freedom in a positive sense, i.e. self-mastery or self-determination.¹⁰ To take a simple example, I am not free in the first sense if a dictator prevents me from doing what I want. The classic threat to freedom in this sense is, of course, Pharaoh. Suppose, however, that while there are no external constraints to what I can do, there are internal ones. Suppose, in other words, that I am addicted to drugs or alcohol, that I am obsessed with jealousy or revenge, or that my self-knowledge is so distorted that I routinely do things that I come to regret. It could be said that under these circumstances, I am not free because I am at the mercy of harmful or dehumanizing tendencies that spring from within. We do, after all, speak of being a slave to passion. When this happens, even though the problem is internal, it would be fair to say that the person has failed to achieve an adequate degree of self-control and in that sense cannot be said to have acted freely.

⁹ Albo, Joseph, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, trans. Isaac Husik, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1929, Book 1, Ch. 2, 55.

¹⁰ The origin of this distinction can be traced at least to Kant’s distinction between *Wille* and *Willkur* and before that to Plato’s conception of *bouleis* at *Gorgias* 466b ff. The question raised by Plato is whether I can really be said to do as I wish if my action runs counter to what is in my own best interest. Contemporary philosophers often begin their discussion of this issue by citing Isaiah Berlin’s famous essay “Two Concepts of Liberty” in: Berlin, Isaiah, *Four Essays on Liberty*, London: Oxford University Press, 1969. Berlin is right to point out that the positive conception of liberty runs the risk of becoming another form of tyranny if the question of what is in my own best interest is entirely the hands of other people. It should be clear however that the negative conception of freedom as lack of external constraint runs risks as well, e.g. if a government were to allow people to sell themselves into slavery on the ground that it is up to each individual to decide whether slavery is in his best interest.

As the various conceptions of freedom are developed, we will see that some fit better with the negative conception while others fit better with the positive conception. In the end, I will argue that to understand the role of freedom in Jewish thought, we must do justice to both.

1 The Giving of Law

The normal way to understand the giving of law in a religious context is to invoke the concept of revelation: an omniscient God gives his chosen prophet an authoritative list of do's and don'ts. There are well-defined rewards for obedience and equally well-defined punishments for disobedience. No one doubts that there are passages in the Torah (Pentateuch) that read this way *if viewed in isolation*. As Hegel put it: "All law is given by the Lord, and is thus entirely positive commandment."¹¹ The fact is however that these passages occur in a larger narrative in which the primary way for God to establish order is not just to hand down law but to offer a covenant (*brit*). There is now general agreement that the model for such covenants was a suzerain treaty between a sovereign and a vassal.¹² But whatever their source, the important point is that a covenant is much more than a simple decree.

In crucial places in the Hebrew Bible, God enters into covenants with Noah, Abraham, the whole Israelite nation, and David. While the latter three deal with the fate of the Jewish people, the Rabbis interpreted the first and oldest, the covenant with Noah, which contains the prohibition against spilling innocent human blood, to apply to all of humanity.¹³ In simple terms, this covenant sets forth the basic principles needed to live a civilized life: prohibitions against idolatry, blasphemy, murder, theft, impermissible sexual unions, eating meat from a live animal, and a positive commandment to establish courts of justice.

It goes without saying that not all covenants take the same form. Sometimes they involve a relation between equal parties (Gen 21:32), sometimes between unequal parties (1Sam 11:1), sometimes the relation between a king and his council

11 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, trans. E. B. Spears/J. B. Sanderson, New York: Humanities Press, 1962, vol. II, 211.

12 For the historical background to the biblical notion of covenant, cf. Mendenhall, George, "Ancient Oriental and Biblical Law," *Biblical Archaeologist* 17 (1954), 24–26 as well as idem, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," *Biblical Archeologist* 17 (1954), 50–76. For further discussion of the philosophic implications of this idea cf. Seeskin, Kenneth, *Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001, chapter 2.

13 Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 56a.

(1Chron 11:30), and sometimes a marriage vow (Prov 2:17). Whatever form they take, the important point is that they constitute an invitation. As Exodus 19:5 puts it: “Therefore if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession out of all the peoples of the earth.” Note the difference: “*If* you obey my voice,” rather than just “Obey my voice.” In the former case, the dominant party seeks the recipient’s consent; in the latter, consent has no role to play – the recipient is ordered to do something regardless what she thinks about it.

Consent, in turn, is meaningless unless the person who gives it is free to accept the proposal or reject it. To ask for someone’s consent is therefore to respect their dignity as a moral agent capable of making up their own mind.¹⁴ Pharaoh ruled as an absolute dictator never asking for anyone’s consent. By contrast, God, who is mightier than Pharaoh, asks for consent again and again. In addition to Sinai, the covenant is offered in the plains of Moab, between Mounts Ebal and Gerizim, at Joshua 24, and again at 2 Kings 23. According to Exodus 24: 4, everything God asked of the people was written down so that they could know exactly what they were agreeing to.

At this point, it is necessary to introduce a qualification. When I say that consent implies recognition of human dignity, I do not mean to suggest that the biblical conception of human dignity is a close approximation to ours. We are talking about a culture that accepted slavery, polygamy, arranged marriages, and wars of conquest. It would be thousands of years before someone would argue that every human being is an end in him or herself. A well-known rabbinic passage even has God holding a mountain over the people at Sinai and threatening to drop it on them if they fail to accept what he has offered.¹⁵

Despite all of this, we should not lose sight of the enormous difference between Pharaoh’s way of making law and God’s. In addition to issue of consent, there is also that of inclusiveness. When the covenant is accepted at Exodus 24, we are told that all the people answered with one voice and gave their acceptance. At Deuteronomy 29:10, the text goes much further:

You stand assembled today, all of you, before the LORD your God, the leaders of your tribes, your elders, and your officials, all the men of Israel,

¹⁴ As I see it, even in those cases where a covenant is given unconditionally as a gift rather than pact or bond (e.g. Genesis 15:18 or Numbers 25:12), the dignity of the recipient is implied.

¹⁵ Talmud, *Shabbat* 88a. The rabbis knew that a contract entered into under duress is not valid, hence the suggestion that if this were true, it would destroy the whole Torah. Another suggestion is that the covenant at Sinai was not ratified until the time of Esther, almost a thousand years later. In any case, it is clear from the passage that consent cannot be forced.

your children, your women, and the strangers who are in your camp, even those who cut your wood and draw your water, to enter into the covenant of the LORD your God, sworn by an oath, which the LORD your God is making with you today.

In a famous essay, Emmanuel Levinas argued that if we were to take all the people who stood at Sinai (the traditional number is 603,550) and multiply it by the number of things the law asks us to do, e.g. to learn, to teach, to observe, and to keep, as well as the number of times it is offered, one would get $48 \times 603,550$, an enormous number of individual covenants!¹⁶

The exact number is unimportant. What matters is that a God who could destroy heaven and earth just as easily as he created them has asked human beings, from the top of the social register down to the very bottom, to join in a partnership. Why, one may ask, did God go to such lengths to gain the consent of mortal creatures? Why did he not decide that might makes right and rule as Pharaoh did?

From a moral standpoint, the answer is that no matter how much power can be applied, might alone does not make right. While promises of reward and threats of punishment can make it in my *interest* to obey God, they cannot make it my *obligation* to obey. For an obligation to arise, the people must agree to do what God has asked – hence the constant repetition of the act of acceptance. Beginning in the Book of Deuteronomy (31:16–22) and continuing in later prophetic literature, the people's disobedience is compared to sex outside of marriage on the grounds that the people pledged their allegiance to God and now have gone back on their word.¹⁷

From a theological standpoint, the answer is that God wants more than simple obedience. A famous midrash makes this point by saying: "If you are My witnesses, then I am God ... but if you are not my witnesses, then, as it were, I am not God." It is not that God will cease to exist if the people are not his witnesses but that God's plan for the world will not be complete as long as humans and God are estranged.¹⁸ In short, God seeks a partner, and with a partner, the recognition

¹⁶ Levinas, Emmanuel, "The Pact," in: Sean Hand (ed.), *The Levinas Reader*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, 211–226. The 603,550 figure (Numbers 1:46) is usually taken to refer to men of fighting age. If this number is accurate, the total number of people would have to be close to 2,000,000.

¹⁷ Cf., for example, Hosea 1–3, Jer 2, Ezekiel 16.

¹⁸ For a modern account of how God can have needs, cf. Novak, David, *The Jewish Social Contract*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, 179–180. The basic idea is that while there is nothing that God lacks in the sense that getting it would make him a more perfect being, it is

that only a true partner can provide. At Deuteronomy 6:5, he goes further and asks for love. This is what allowed Hosea and other prophets to compare the covenant with a marriage vow. Again the contrast with Pharaoh is telling. An absolute dictator is satisfied with obedience alone; God is not. To rule as a lonely king in heaven without human participation and devotion is contrary to the divine purpose. But such participation and devotion makes no sense unless it is freely given. Absent the element of choice and the result would be a forced marriage rather than a true one.

We can therefore agree with David Hartman, when he says: “The creation of a being capable of saying no to divine commands is the supreme expression of divine love, insofar as God makes room for humans as independent, free creatures.”¹⁹ In fact, the ability to say no to God is more than just a remote possibility. Though Abraham is ready to leave his father’s house at God’s command, and eventually ready to sacrifice his son, it is noteworthy that when God announces his plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, he protests (Genesis 18:25): “Shall not the judge of all earth do what is just?” Despite Abraham’s devotion to God, he is willing to say no when God’s intention contradicts his own sense of right and wrong.

Then there is Moses. When God first summons him at the burning bush, he is reluctant to take on the role of leader and comes up with so many objections to what God’s has asked that he eventually provokes God’s anger. Moses’ independence of spirit receives further expression in two places where he protests God’s plan to destroy the people as a punishment for disobedience. In the first (Exodus 32:13–14), Moses points out that if God carries through on his plan, the Egyptians will form a false impression of the Exodus and God will be breaking the promise he made to Abraham (“You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations”). In the second (Numbers 14:13–19), he makes essentially the same points: the nations of the earth will form a false impression and, again, God will be breaking a promise, in this case the one he made to Moses at Exodus 34:5–8 (“The Lord is slow to anger ...”).²⁰

Abraham and Moses are just two examples of how biblical characters express their independence. One also could cite Job, Jonah, and Jeremiah. It is

nonetheless true that God is concerned about the finite beings he has created and wants to see them flourish.

¹⁹ Hartman, David, *A Living Covenant*, New York: Free Press, 1985, 24.

²⁰ For further discussion, cf. S. H. Blank, “Men Against God. The Promethean Element in Biblical Prayer,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 72 (1953), 1–13. For a contemporary version of the same phenomenon, cf. Kolitz, Zvi, *Yossel Rakover Talks to God*, trans. Paul Badde, New York: Pantheon Books, 1999.

not just that God lets these characters talk back to him but that they raise themselves in our estimation by doing so. They are people rather than religious automatons. In many ways, they are fighting our fight, asking the kind of questions that we would ask. Even though their piety is legendary, they do not see piety and the ability to think for themselves as being in conflict with one another. If God wants a real partner, then the terms of the partnership apply equally well whether in heaven or on earth. Mutual recognition has to be given, and promises have to be kept. This is another way of saying that if the partnership is going to amount to anything, then the junior partner cannot be hushed up or forced into submission.

The ability of the junior partner to say no to God or, at the very least, to hold God to account, represents a decisive move in the direction of negative freedom. The dictator has been replaced by a covenant partner. But this should not blind us to the fact that a move has been made in the direction of positive freedom as well. If all that happened is that the dictator was removed, the people would be nothing more than an unruly mob traveling in the desert. At times, e.g. the Golden Calf or the revolt of Korach, this description seems spot on. The truth is, however, that an unruly mob with no external constraints is not the same as a free people. To become the latter, the Israelites must constitute themselves *as* a people, which means that they have to accept the rule of law and commit themselves to a set of goals. What sort of things do they stand for? What sort of things do they reject? The acceptance of a covenant is supposed to answer these questions by having the people commit and recommit to a way of life that insists on the establishment of a civilized order with protections for those at the lower end of the social scale.

It will be objected that if you take the time to examine the covenant that the people accept, you will see a plethora of statutory commandments governing everything from eating to cleaning, from marriage and sexuality to property rights, from holidays to sacrificial rights and priestly vestments. According to tradition, the Torah contains a total of 613 separate commandments.

On the basis of Deuteronomy 4 (“Behold, I have taught you statutes and laws ...”), we can divide the commandments into either of two groups: laws (*mishpatim*) and statutes (*chukkim*). The Rabbis argued that the former are ones such that if God had not given them to us, we would have been justified in giving to ourselves.²¹ This group would include the prohibitions against murder, lying, or adultery. The latter are completely dependent on God and include such things as the prohibitions against eating pork or wearing a garment with a mixture

21 Talmud, *Yoma* 67b.

of fibers. It is often said that the statutes are what pose a real test of faith because in the absence of a rational reason to obey them, the only reason one can give is that God has commanded them. Since most of the 613 commandments are statutory in nature, it is here that we encounter the criticism that Judaism is a religion of positive commandment issued by a distant and unapproachable God.

Against this way of looking at Jewish law, Maimonides advances two claims. The first is that because God does nothing frivolous or in vain, everything God commands must have a reason behind it.²² If so, the difference between the laws and statutes must be that in the former case, the reasons for the commandments are plainly visible while in the latter case, the reasons for the commandments have to be investigated. If this is true, then there is no such thing as a commandment that is purely arbitrary. The second is that when God gave the Torah to Israel, he had to take into account the historical experience of the people who received it.²³ Having seen luxurious sanctuaries and a sacrificial cult in Egypt, the people would have expected similar places and practices from Judaism. To give them a religion without animal sacrifice, for example, would be the equivalent of giving modern worshippers a religion without hymns or prayers.

Maimonides buttresses the latter point by engaging in what one might call theological history. Since Abraham came after Noah, we can assume that Abraham was bound by all the commandments contained in the Noachide covenant. As we saw, these laws are binding on the whole human race and are the basic principles needed to live a civilized life. But an atheist could abide by them as long as he did not blaspheme God. Except for the one dealing with law courts, none impels a person to take part in any kind of community practice. A hermit who lived in an isolated location could fulfill them as well. The only commandment that Abraham received that marked him as a Jew is the right of circumcision (Genesis 17:10).

In short, Abraham's religion had nothing in the way of dietary laws, festivals, standardized prayer, special articles of clothing, or Sabbath observance. He sacrificed to God on certain occasions, but for all we know, these sacrifices were spontaneous and did not involve anything in the way of community participation. Maimonides took this to mean that except for circumcision, Abraham's

²² Maimonides, Moses, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, 3.28. I should add that according to Maimonides, the search for reasons cannot go into the minute details of worship. While there was a reason why God mandated a sacrificial cult – the people had been accustomed to sacrifice as a mode of worship – it is impossible to say why a ram is needed in one case and a goat in another.

²³ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3.31.

religion was purely intellectual.²⁴ Thus Maimonides contends that he had good philosophic arguments for the existence of an immaterial God and propagated them as best he could. His arguments were passed on to Isaac and Jacob. As Maimonides sees it, the Israelites abandoned Abraham's religion during the Egyptian captivity not because his arguments were invalid but because people need more than abstract arguments to hold them together as a faith community.

The result is that God had to start the religion all over again at Sinai. Given the failure of Abraham's religion, there was no choice but to introduce festivals, dietary laws, a priestly cast, a Tabernacle where the priests could perform their rights, and Sabbath observance.²⁵ In addition to reminding people of the promise they made at Sinai, these things would standardize worship and bring them together as a community. Granted that the resulting religion would not be as spontaneous as Abraham's, Maimonides' point is that most people lack Abraham's intelligence and devotion. For the average worshipper, the need for order, tradition, and community involvement cannot be overlooked.

With order, tradition, and community involvement come statutory laws. Just as governments, military regiments, sports teams, and social clubs need ceremonies, standardized clothing, music, and historical markers to hold their members together and reinforce shared commitments, religious communities need them as well. To an outsider, these practices might seem arbitrary, e.g. not boiling a kid in its mother's milk. To an insider like Maimonides, however, these practices direct one's attention to important truths or call to mind collective memories: boiling a kid in its mother's milk was a pagan ritual tied to idolatrous worship.

It follows that if were we to study the history of the ancient Near East, then Maimonides argues, we would find that what at first glance seem like statutory laws forced on the people without rhyme or reason, are in fact meaningful practices designed to teach valuable lessons. So far from the whims of a distant and unapproachable God, they are concessions to human fallibility, in particular the need to band together with like-minded people to pursue common goals.

With Maimonides' theological history in mind, we are in a position to see why it is incorrect to say that in moving from Pharaoh to God, the people traded one form of slavery for another. In addition to the manner in which the law is given – a covenant rather than a marching order – there is also a difference in the content of the law. Pharaoh sought political and economic advantages from the labor of his slaves. By contrast, God seeks only a spiritual partnership.

²⁴ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 1. Laws Concerning Idolatry, 1.2. Needless to say, there is nothing in the biblical text to corroborate this.

²⁵ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3.32.