I think of the process of learning as always having the potential to be a process of encountering God, and I see this potential highlighted by the Jewish practice of reciting the doxology known as “the Kaddish” to conclude an experience of study. While the Kaddish is popularly associated with prayer services and with mourning, it has a long history of being used to conclude an experience of study. The core words of the Kaddish, “May [God’s] great name be blessed forever and for all eternity,” and the subsequent words of the Kaddish that speak of the transcendence of “the name of the Holy One,” can play an especially important role in connecting experiences of learning to the moral ideal that God’s name represents.

One of the oldest sources to invoke these words of the Kaddish is a passage in the Babylonian Talmud that reflects on the darkness of the centuries following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The fourth-century sage Rava is said to have claimed that, even
amidst the chaos of destruction, “the world is sustained...by the [words of] sanctification (kidushah) after study and by [the words] ‘May [God’s] great name...’ after the study of aggadah” —the study of sacred narratives or other non-legal discourse. Rava’s prooftext is Job 10:22, in which Job envisions “a land whose light is like darkness, the deepest gloom and disorder.” Rava goes on to affirm that proper study—described with the word “order” (sidra in Aramaic, seder in Hebrew)—can provide light and reverse such disorder and darkness. But it appears from this passage that it is not just study itself, but rather the doxologies of sanctification (Kedushah or Kaddish) and the key words invoking God’s “great name” following study that provided Rava with an experience of light that seemed to sustain the world. The expression of hope for God’s great name to be blessed for eternity appears to have connected the experience of learning with the light provided by the “great name” of the Eternal.

**God’s Name and the Idea of the Good**

What is God’s “great name”? A long-standing Jewish tradition suggests that God’s name cannot be fully articulated, but that human beings can use names that point toward the transcendent. Among the names invoked by traditional Jewish liturgy, I will focus on one that is of particular significance for reflections on learning: “the Good” (ha-tov). This name is given particular prominence in the Amidah, the silent prayer traditionally recited three times daily, which includes the declaration that “your name is the Good” (ha-tov shimkha). “It is fitting to give praise,” the liturgy goes on to say, to God as known by this name.

Some Jews view the declaration that God’s name is “the Good” as a declaration that God is a person, being, or force characterized by goodness. I do not, as I do not think that any person, being, or
force deserves the ultimate devotion that Jewish law and liturgy see as appropriate to give to God. The particular Jewish philosophical tradition within which I locate myself suggests that God is not a person or being or force at all. Rather, God should be identified with “the Idea of the Good”—an infinite goodness that goes beyond the limited goodness that human beings can describe but that constitutes a moral ideal toward which all human beings should strive. “We can conceive of [God] only as we conceive of the Idea of the Good,” as Hermann Cohen put it. “This is the simple, profound, true meaning of God’s transcendence. God is in truth ‘beyond me,’ for [God] is the Holy One, the archetype of all human morality.”

God’s goodness is “holy,” separate from and transcending all human goodness but representing a moral ideal or archetype toward which human beings must continually aspire. What the Kaddish calls “the name of the Holy One” is “the Good,” “the Idea of the Good” or, as Cohen puts it at one point, “the infinitely Good.” These are names that I think are appropriate to identify with “the great name of God” invoked by the Kaddish, for they are names that help us to understand that ultimate praise should be offered not to any “being” (whether tending toward omnipotence or impotence) or any “force” (whether a consciousness found in the world or a power found in our own inclinations), but only to an ideal of perfection that invites our continual reflection and moral growth.

We humans tend too often, I think, to worship gods that are easy to relate to because they are made in the image of our own ideals and identities. I honor the value of such worship and of God-language that is calibrated to human needs, desires, and cultures, as all language must be—for in using God-language, we must “speak in the language of human beings,” to use the rabbinic phrase favored by Maimonides. But the Jewish tradition of worshipping God by the name of “the Good”—as the “Idea of the Good,” as an ideal of absolute goodness—
offers a helpful challenge to these honorable tendencies. The continual reminders within Jewish tradition to “turn toward God” have greater moral power when that to which we are turning is not an entity that reflects our needs but an ideal that exceeds our needs. When studying traditions that stem from particular human perspectives, it is good to lift up our eyes toward an ideal that transcends those perspectives. It is fitting to remind ourselves of a moral archetype of ultimate goodness that continually challenges us to look beyond ourselves, our cultures, and the natural world and instead toward greater moral goodness. It is “fitting to give praise” to such an ideal, keeping it in our minds and hearts, turning toward its infinite light with love, reverence, and a longing for moral improvement.

Practices of study can, I think, point us toward this ideal. In considering God as “the Good,” Hermann Cohen pointed to Maimonides’ emphasis on study—not just of halakhah but also of aggadah, and not just of “Torah” in a narrow sense but also of “wisdom” in a broad sense. Maimonides built on aggadic traditions, Cohen contends, in developing his vision of the Torah as directing Jews to seek the greatest moral wisdom, which culminates in seeing the archetypal “lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness” toward which human beings must aspire. Moral wisdom that seeks such ideals is the ultimate goal of the Torah, and the Torah’s truth claims must be justified by critical philosophical inquiry, as “it is wisdom which must verify the teachings of the Torah through true speculation.” Cohen also pointed to Maimonides’ claim that turning toward a true vision of the Good requires scientific inquiry into the nature of the world, for a commitment to truth will also yield longing and praise for God’s great name: “When a person contemplates [God’s] works…he will immediately love and praise and glorify and long with a great longing to know [God’s] great name….When he thinks of these things themselves, he will immediately recoil with fear and be conscious that he is a small, lowly, obscure creature, with extremely
little understanding, standing before Perfect Understanding." Here, scientific learning reminds one of the extreme limits of one’s vision; but it also leads to praise of God’s great name and a longing to know that name—a desire for further understanding of God’s perfection, what Maimonides calls “great longing to know [God’s] great name.”

This same longing can be found in the words of the Kaddish, the meditation that connects study to the hope that God’s “great name be blessed forever and for all eternity.” Crucially, the words of the Kaddish go on to emphasize that God’s name transcends the limited descriptions that human beings can offer. Blessing God’s name “forever and for all eternity” requires awareness that human language is inadequate for speaking of infinite goodness. Thus the Kaddish continues with a prayer: “May the name of the Holy One be blessed and praised and glorified and exalted and extolled and honored and lifted up and lauded—beyond all of the blessings and hymns and praises and consolations that are spoken in the world.” The ultimate moral goodness of “God’s name” that Cohen described as “beyond me” is, indeed, beyond all that human beings can articulate. It is like a shining light toward which we are called—but our own vision will always be limited and can never describe the fullness of that light. As much as we strive to make God’s name known in the world, as much as we can strive to increase goodness in the world through our learning and through our deeds, there is always more goodness that is beyond our reach.

**Study and the Philosophic Quest**

Most human beings, Maimonides claims in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, “grope about in [the] night…’they know not, neither do they understand; they go about in darkness’ (Psalm 82:5). The truth, in spite
of the strength of its manifestation, is entirely hidden from them, as is said of them: ‘And now men see not the light which is bright in the skies’ (Job 38:21).” Rare individuals may see glimpses of light as from a luminous stone, or even as from a lightning flash: “sometimes truth flashes out so that we think that it is day” before “we find ourselves again in an obscure night.” For prophets, however, “lightning flashes time and time again,” and the greatest of prophets, Moses, apparently could see sufficient light that “night appears to him as day.” But even Moses was not able to fully apprehend God’s perfect goodness. As Maimonides describes it elsewhere, prophets are inevitably separated from God by “veils”—their moral vices—and even Moses is separated from God, despite his virtue. No human being is able to see God directly: “You cannot see My face,” God tells Moses after the sin of the golden calf, “for none may see Me and live” (Exodus 33:20). Israel has engaged in worship of a golden calf, perhaps attempting to worship God through bowing down to the form of the calf; God’s response might serve to remind Moses and the people of Israel that God transcends any form. Nonetheless, God affirms that Moses can perceive some glimpse of God’s transcendent goodness, which is identified with God’s great name. “I will pass My goodness before you, and I will proclaim before you the name of the Eternal” (Exodus 33:19), God tells Moses. Moses does perceive the great name and the qualities of God’s transcendent goodness; in Maimonides’ explanation, what he sees are moral ideals of “lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness” that exceed human reach but that provide an archetype toward which humans should aspire.

Maimonides’ vision of how human beings may encounter God draws on Plato’s allegorical description of “our nature in its education and want of education,” an allegory regarding the Idea of the Good that is also central for later Jewish thinkers like Cohen. The allegory describes human beings as bound within a cave, with a fire behind them, and puppeteers using the light of the fire to project images onto the blank wall in front of the prisoners. Unaware of the puppeteers,
the prisoners understand the shadows on the wall in front of them to be undeniably real and true. True reality lies outside of the cave, where the sun—the Idea of the Good—may be found. But nearly all human beings are trapped within our cultures, unaware even of how our own fundamental beliefs, values, and myths are constructed by those “puppeteers” who have the power to teach us, and whose teachings may simply reflect their own selfish desires for power.17

The philosopher Socrates, the character who offers this allegory in Plato's *Republic*, imagines that there are rare individuals skilled in the art of “turning around,” who can go through the painful process of detaching themselves from their cultures, climbing out of the cave; these are people whom Socrates calls philosophers.18 Philosophers may gain some glimpse of the Good beyond the cave. They might, then, be compelled to return to their caves and gain control over the kinds of ideas and myths that are projected onto the wall of the cave. A philosopher could translate his insights from the outside world into narratives that could help to improve ordinary human life.

Plato depicts Socrates as compelled to do this work; Maimonides, in turn, envisions Moses as compelled to do this work. Just as Socrates must exercise great care in bringing his insights to the people of Athens, Moses must exercise great care in bringing his insights to the people of Israel, translating the infinite Good (God) into myths and rituals that his people can understand. The Torah of Moses takes human weaknesses into account, Maimonides argues, helping them to grow toward God while recognizing that “man, according to his nature, is not capable of abandoning suddenly all to which he was accustomed.”19 Bringing the people toward God must happen gradually, making many concessions to the weaknesses of human nature and to the particularities of Israelite culture—the Torah must, in the language that Maimonides favors, “speak in the language of human beings.” Thus, for example, Maimonides viewed many commandments regarding worship—such as the use of language in
prayer and, all the more so, the establishment of a sacrificial cult at a central shrine (eventually located in Jerusalem)—as concessions that would help the Israelites to avoid idolatry and focus on God. The commandments are not perfect in and of themselves, but they are a means to an end: studying and performing the Torah’s imperfect commandments help to bring human beings toward the perfection that God’s name represents. Using the language of the Kaddish, we might say that studying the Torah brings people into contact with hymns and consolations that are developed for this world; but the process of study can also direct people toward an ideal of goodness, the holy name that goes beyond all of the blessings, hymns, praises, and consolations that are molded to fit the world.

Plato’s Republic makes it clear that those who expose how myths and norms are constructed by “puppeteer” mythmakers and legislators will be viewed as grave threats to those who live within the cave, whether as puppeteers or as prisoners. Directing those within a culture to the universal goodness that lies beyond the constructions of a culture’s particular political life—trying to release prisoners from their shackles—would result in the murder of a philosopher who (like Socrates) sought to release the prisoners. “If they were somehow able to get their hands on and kill the man who attempts to release and lead up, wouldn’t they kill him?” The Republic indicates that if philosophers are to have any power within a city, they must not engage in this kind of effort to free prisoners, but must instead accommodate themselves to the city’s cultural norms and practical needs. Though any effort to be involved in gaining the power necessary to influence a culture would be unappealing to a true philosopher and would in any case corrupt that philosopher, Socrates continues to raise the possibility that philosophers should bring their insights to the political realm—perhaps making some improvement in the life of the city, perhaps creating a climate that will be friendly to the quest
for the Good that philosophers like Socrates seek to undertake. The
society shaped by the philosopher will inevitably be far from perfect,
though. And even the greatest philosophers will be far from the
Good, just as Socrates himself is always aware of his own ignorance,
ever satisfied with himself but always striving for further knowledge
and virtue. Socrates shows how the process of learning always reveals
new questions and the longing for greater growth.22

Plato’s discussion of the relationship between human beings and
the Good is paralleled by Maimonides’ discussion of the relationship
between human beings and God. Just as the philosopher, like Socrates,
can ascend out of the cave and strive toward the Good, Moses can
ascend Mount Sinai and strive to see God as clearly as possible—even if, in the end, he cannot see God’s face. Just as the philosopher
might ideally create myths that might bring his community closer to
the Good, Moses creates myths that might help his community to
gradually turn toward the Good—that is, toward God. And just as
a city would seek to reject and even murder a philosopher who tried
too overtly to release prisoners from their shackles, the people of
Israel repeatedly rebel against the threat that Moses represents.

When he brings the people to Mount Sinai and asks them to
devote themselves to God, Moses might seem, at least at first, to
be asking Israel to “abandon suddenly all to which they were
accustomed.” The Torah that he brings from Sinai threatens to
disrupt the lives of the people of Israel and asks them to turn away
from all that they know. And the people are “stiff-necked” (Exodus
32:9), as God will go on to observe. They will do what they can to
resist the call to change. Perhaps the Torah is especially threatening
to those who would otherwise want to have power, and who resist
the idea that Moses can, like a philosopher, ascend and gain radical
insights into the Good that will demand a total restructuring of
power among the people of Israel.
Indeed, one midrashic tradition suggests that the people of Israel respond to the threat of the Torah of Moses just as the people of Athens respond to the threat of the philosophy of Socrates: seeking to kill those who challenge the establishment. According to the midrash, Moses’ brother Aaron and his nephew Hur, both prophets themselves, are left in Moses’ place when the latter is on Mount Sinai, and the people rise up and kill Hur. Hur was guilty of challenging and rebuking the people when they sought to build and worship a golden calf, turning away from God and toward an idol. According to this tradition, “Aaron feared” (Exodus 32:5, as understood by the midrash) that the people would seek to kill him as well, and he seeks to save his life by making a concession to the needs of the people, supporting their efforts to build and worship the golden calf. Aaron saves his own life, and perhaps Moses’ life as well, by conceding to the mob and supporting their idolatry.23

This tradition makes use of the ambiguities in the Hebrew narrative regarding the golden calf, explains why the character of Hur seems to disappear from the narrative, and, above all, helps to exonerate Aaron, explaining why it might be that such an admirable figure would seem to take the lead in efforts to worship the calf. The midrash might also lead us to see Aaron as in fact doing what we might see Moses as learning to do: making concessions to the people of Israel, supporting the development of imperfect traditions amidst a climate where prophets might be killed for the challenges they pose.24

Perhaps, in fact, Moses learned to make concessions based on the model of Aaron. According to one reading of Maimonides—found in the writings of Isaac Abravanel—it is precisely the episode of the golden calf and the resulting political climate that causes the Torah of Moses to be filled with the concessions that it contains. While Moses cannot tolerate Aaron’s concessions in building a golden calf, he realizes that the people of Israel require more tangible forms of
worship, and so he introduces concessions that include not only sacrificial worship but, in fact, nearly all of the rituals of the Torah. After his vision of God’s transcendent moral ideals, and his discovery that God is willing to make concessions despite Israel’s sinfulness, Moses returns from his encounter with the Good with a new vision for how to bring flashes of divine light into the reality in which Israel lives. He has encountered the light of the Good such that “the skin of his face sent forth beams” (Exodus 34:29)—as Maimonides explains, such that “night appears to him as day.” I imagine that Moses discovered a new vision of how the people might gradually be guided to the encounter with God through a Torah that will speak in the language of human beings. The traditions that the people of Israel will practice and study will, from this point on, be like shadows projected against a cave wall by a prophetic puppeteer. They offer great potential for teaching the people of Israel about a God who transcends all human descriptions; but their potential is magnified if they are studied with the reminder of the Kaddish that God transcends the Torah and reaches “beyond all of the blessings and hymns and praises and consolations that are spoken in the world.”

The Potential for Growth After the Golden Calf

The study of Torah has the potential to inspire growth and to remind people of the Good in this way, magnifying God’s great name. By way of example, I have suggested how studying the golden calf narrative can help to remind its readers that although the Torah is not in itself perfect, it can point to the transcendence of which the Kaddish speaks. Staying with this example, I would add that studying the narrative of the golden calf can also remind people of the obligation to continually grow and strive toward an overarching moral ideal, guiding them away
from the shadows on the wall and toward a greater light.

Rabbi Simḥah Zissel Ziv, one of the leading figures in the nineteenth-century Musar movement—a movement characterized by its relentless focus on seeking continual growth of moral character—saw this as the core message of the golden calf narrative.27 As Simḥah Zissel notes, God’s language (in Exodus 32:9–10) threatening to destroy Israel after their worship of the golden calf does not mention idolatry or the calf, but only that Israel “is a stiff-necked people”:

We should contemplate with understanding that [God] did not mention the fact of this great sin [with the calf], but only mentioned that this was a stiff-necked people. The explanation of the matter is that [Israel] was not able to turn its neck to listen, meaning it was not able to turn from the habit to which it had been habituated. And, God forbid, on account of this it was far from turning [t’shuvah; repentance]… for the character trait of stiffening against changing one’s nature was worse than the great sin of the calf; were it not for this character trait, they would not have been fit to be destroyed.28

Israel is, here, collectively fixed in their habits, refusing to grow, refusing to turn to God. “They did not continue to grow and learn,” as Simḥah Zissel puts it elsewhere, “and the essence of what the blessed Holy One loves is that one continues to grow and learn.”29 Israel showed no willingness to listen to criticism and instead responded to the criticism of Hur with hatred and violence: as Simḥah Zissel notes, “being stiff-necked is not continuing to learn, and therefore hating in the depths of one’s heart the one who criticizes him.”30

But many among the people of Israel who responded to Hur’s criticism with hatred come to heed Moses’ criticism, and they discover what Simḥah Zissel describes as “love of reproof.”31 They escape destruction, as they find that accepting and loving the criticism
offered by a prophet can help them to move forward in their process of personal growth. Above all, Simḥah Zissel suggests, prophets can help the people of Israel understand how and why God needs them to grow in key virtues such as lovingkindness, compassion, and justice.32

The best of prophets, like Moses, can accommodate the needs of the people and gradually help them to turn their heads and listen to the voices that challenge them to grow. To use the language of Plato, the best of philosophers, like Socrates, can gradually help the people of the city to turn toward the Good.

Indeed, Simḥah Zissel himself was struck by the way in which the figure of Socrates seemed to resemble an ideal Jewish sage who does not claim firm knowledge but always seeks to learn and progress toward greater goodness:

> It is an amazing thing that the philosopher Socrates said: “There are people who need to [claim to] know everything that is asked of them, for without this one is not a wise man. But I do not say this; [rather] all of my wisdom is that I know that I do not know.” These are the words of the sage, Socrates. Accordingly, we have said, this is the reason that the sages in the Talmud are always called “the disciples of the sages” \( [talmidei ḥakhamim] \) for all of their days, they are like disciples who are learning.33

From this perspective, the challenge offered by rabbinic sages and philosophers—and by prophets—requires that human beings acknowledge the limitations of their knowledge and commit to continual learning and growth. Israel, at the time of the golden calf, responded to this challenge by retorting that they did not want to join any quest for the Good that would disrupt their entrenched habits. But Moses ultimately persuaded the people to join him on a path of becoming “disciples”—not sages but “disciples of sages”—in the style
of Socrates, who would always be seeking greater and greater wisdom. The path of continual study that they agreed to embark upon is a path of magnifying and sanctifying God's name—not because it claims knowledge, but because it accepts that humans must always seek greater growth. The process of learning should always be connected with the experience at Sinai, through which the people of Israel acknowledged their limited perspective and learned to turn from the golden calf—and toward “the name of the Holy One” which called them higher and higher, “beyond all of the blessings and hymns and praises and consolations that are spoken in the world.”

During the Days of Repentance and on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the days on the Jewish calendar that commemorate the culmination of Israel's repentance and forgiveness following the episode of the golden calf, it is appropriate that the words of the Kaddish are traditionally modified to even further emphasize God's greatness, proclaiming that God's name points “beyond—and further beyond—all of the blessings” and other worldly creations. When we focus on the potential for growth after the golden calf episode, we should be reminded all the more of God's infinite goodness and the corollary that one must “continue to grow and learn,” reaching beyond and even further beyond our ordinary inclinations. It is fitting to conclude one's study of the golden calf narrative with the words of the Kaddish, which can remind us to challenge our assumptions in light of the Good that is beyond being.

**Historical-Critical Scholarship and Its Challenge to Pious Certainty**

Simḥah Zissel Ziv and the Musar movement thus developed a model of education that would help to inspire continual moral growth. And Simḥah Zissel criticized those whom he saw as rejecting that
model and instead credulously accepting unjustified assumptions that limited their vision. He criticized traditionalist Jewish scholars whom he saw as valorizing talmudic scholarship but as unwilling to engage in the continual work of developing moral virtue, and he also criticized more liberal Jewish scholars whom he saw as credulously accepting the assumptions of Western culture. Simḥah Zissel hoped that reflective meditation\textsuperscript{35} on texts like the golden calf narrative could inspire Jews to be scholars of a different sort, who would—like the classical rabbinic sages, like Socrates, or like Moses or other great prophets—continually question their assumptions and continually seek to grow in virtue.

But traditionalists like Simḥah Zissel, of course, refused to question their own dogmatic assumptions about the Torah in general or the golden calf narrative in particular. Simḥah Zissel may have encouraged questioning assumptions, but he also asked his students to have certainty about core values and not simply to claim ignorance. Like other traditional readers of the Torah, he wanted his students to stand firmly on the right side of the battle that is described in the golden calf narrative, and not to be like the people of Israel who floundered in their ignorance and uncertainty, building a calf because they “[did] not know what happened” to Moses (Exodus 32:1).

Indeed, the golden calf narrative seems constructed to demand certainty, not endless questioning. Once Moses returns from the mountain, the people of Israel are expected to choose sides in the battle between Moses and those who support idolatry. Moses calls out, “Whoever is for the Eternal, come here!” (Exodus 32:26), and those who do not come over to his side are sentenced to death. One might imagine an Israelite in the likeness of Socrates who does not claim knowledge of whether Moses is in the right but, rather, would want to question him carefully. Such a philosophic soul would likely be marked for death. In the Torah’s account, Moses immediately
orders the Levites who rally to his side to go and slaughter the three thousand Israelites who do not show their loyalty to God and to him: “Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor, and kin” (Exodus 32:27).36

Simḥah Zissel saw justice in these efforts to divide the righteous from the wicked. Yes, he would point out, one should continually question and seek greater learning—but proper learning demands that one accept certain self-evident truths. Questioning Moses, questioning God, or questioning the perfection of the Torah was obviously inappropriate from his traditionalist perspective. True “disciples of the sages” must be humble, and their humility should not lead them to question their dedication to God’s will as expressed in the Torah but should instead lead them to submit to it. God’s name is sanctified and magnified through the study of Torah, from this perspective, precisely because the reader submits to God’s will as found in the Torah.37

But an alternative path of study that I think better helps us to turn toward the Good acknowledges that the Torah does not perfectly capture God’s will. The sort of epistemic humility attributed to Socrates—and, here, to the rabbinic sages, and to Moses—should encourage us to question our assumptions, to learn with openness and honesty—and thus to turn our necks to hear critical analyses regarding the formation of texts and traditions. Critical study of this sort may help us to turn toward “the name of the Holy One,” that name which is “beyond all of the blessings and hymns and praises and consolations that are spoken in the world.”

When one studies the golden calf narrative from the perspective of historical-critical scholarship, rejecting traditionalist assumptions about biblical authorship and seeking to discover the original contexts in which the Bible was composed, the narrative is easily seen as reflecting a variety of political agendas of interest to the various authors
The Kaddish, the Allegory of the Cave, and the Golden Calf

who may have contributed to its formation. Indeed, for many religious studies scholars who teach in contemporary academic contexts, the golden calf episode can be a key text in helping students to question assumptions about the unity and perfection of Scripture and in seeing the likely political motivation of biblical authors. 38 It is not easy to disentangle layers of sources within the golden calf narrative, and historical-critical approaches to the narrative yield few certainties, but such approaches do suggest that it is possible to see within the narrative various voices that advocate for various political agendas.

Thus, for example, one polemical voice in the narrative appears to be condemning the forms of worship encouraged by King Jeroboam’s Northern Kingdom of Israel—whose central shrines involved the worship of God enthroned on golden calves—by associating such calves with idolatry and orgiastic celebrations. Why would an author condemn the Northern Kingdom’s temples in this way? An author might do so if the author came from the rival Southern Kingdom of Judah, which at its central Temple in Jerusalem imagined the God of Israel enthroned on golden cherubs rather than on golden calves, and was eager to ridicule and delegitimize the Israelite shrines in the north.

Or, for example, the narrative—with its emphasis that “Aaron had let [the people] get out of control” (Exodus 32:25) 39 —also appears to contain a polemical voice condemning the family of Aaron, the leaders of the religious establishment in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. While condemning that family, it praises other Levites, emphasizing the piety of the levitical priests whose violence is applauded and who emerge as the heroes of the narrative. Why would an author implicate Aaron’s family but praise other Levites? An author might do so if the author was a Levite who was—as all (non-Aaronide) Levites were—excluded from the priesthood by the politically powerful priests who traced their ancestry to Aaron. As many historical-critical scholars have concluded, the golden calf narrative was likely written or edited by writers pointing to the supremacy of the Jerusalem Temple and, at the
same time, the legitimacy of priests from beyond the family of Aaron.\footnote{324}

The scholars who suggest the political motivations behind the golden calf story may resemble the philosophers in Plato’s allegory of the cave who expose how myths and norms are constructed by “puppeteer” mythmakers and legislators who may be seeking above all to assert their own power. Exposing how individuals with certain political interests gained the power to produce the texts that came to be included in the Bible, historical-critical scholarship can help to guard against the dangerous traditionalist assumption that these texts are perfect, divine creations. This mode of scholarship helps to remind us that images of God and claims of divine favor for particular priesthoods or particular temples—like the non-Aaronide priesthood, or the Temple in Jerusalem that featured cherubs rather than calves—have been shaped by human political ambitions and are not of ultimate value. Such scholarship reminds us not to bow down before and idolize such human creations, even if we—like prisoners in a cave—have been long accustomed to thinking of these creations as being inherently holy.

And such scholarship can help us to resist the call, attributed by the Torah to Moses and by Moses to God, to divide communities into believers and idolaters and to strike out with pious certainty against brothers, neighbors, and kin who seem to cast their lot with the idolaters.\footnote{41} When we are habituated to such a call, it is difficult to turn our necks and to raise up our eyes to see beyond the puppeteers who have crafted our sacred texts. But historical-critical scholarship, reminding us that the language attributed to God in sacred texts reflects the motivations of its authors, can help us to lift up our eyes toward an infinite ideal that exceeds their perspectives—toward the Good, “the name of the Holy One” that reaches “beyond all of the blessings and hymns and praises and consolations that are spoken in the world.”
The Philosophical Task of Critiquing the Critics

Those who are engaged in scholarship of any sort often have an honorable hope that their study will illuminate the darkness—as did the ancient sage Rava, discussed in the introduction to this essay. Rava, citing Job, suggested that proper study (sidra or seder) would bring order (seder) and light to “a land whose light is like darkness, the deepest gloom and disorder.” So too, those of us who teach the art of biblical criticism, exploring the possible motivations of the authors who stand behind scriptural texts, may often think that we are bringing light and order to an otherwise opaque and confusing text. We can shed light, for example, on the mystery of why a story regarding a golden calf is included at all in the Bible, and why Aaron is at least partially blamed for the episode, and why the Levites turn out to be such heroic holy warriors on the side of God and Moses.42 Historical-critical scholars may also be dedicated to the task of growing in virtue, moving toward the Good by developing intellectual virtues of openness, honesty, and integrity, taking the intellectual virtues that Simḥah Zissel Ziv saw in Socrates more seriously than a traditionalist like Simḥah Zissel was himself willing to do.

Thus, for example, as the biblical scholar Robert Coote put it in a 2008 essay on teaching the historical-critical method, that method above all should “foster inquisitiveness” and seek “virtues, or qualities of character, that contribute to critical learning. These include openness, honesty, courage, patience, humility, and sense of humor.” Those are, Coote explains, virtues that he prays for at the beginning of the courses on the Bible that he teaches.43 Such virtues are essential for the task of resisting certainty, for critical learning requires making tentative judgments but always resisting certainty. As Coote affirms in the name of communication theorist David Zarefsky: “To be
critical is to make provisional judgments before an audience about matters that are significant but uncertain, by use of evidence and reasoning, in the common pursuit of truth or good decision, with a willingness to run the risk of being wrong.” Individuals are limited “by enculturation, experience, and feeling” and, moreover, “because the Bible was written through a process unlike our own and which we do not well understand, and in different times, places, and languages, interpreting the Bible always involves significant uncertainty.” Thus, “criticism starts by doubting that I understand.”

Coote seems to echo the commitment to uncertainty and continual growth in learning that Simḥah Zissel saw as shared by Jewish “disciples of the sages” and by Socrates. But whereas Simḥah Zissel was unable to question his own assumptions regarding the perfection of the Torah (and this may well have constricted his ability to continually grow), Coote rejects theological dogmatism and appears to embrace a deeper epistemic humility, recognizing the limits of his knowledge.

Still, historical-critical scholars, like all of us, may have their own limiting and dogmatic assumptions. Coote, though he may be an exemplar of the scholar who resists certainty, has in fact been criticized for his own overconfident claims regarding the meaning of the Bible. In an essay on historical-critical Bible scholarship, Jon Levenson points to the 1990 book that Coote co-authored with his wife, Mary P. Coote, *Power, Politics, and the Making of the Bible,* as illustrative of the dogmatic certitude to which historical-critical scholars may succumb. In that volume, Levenson points out, the Cootes seem to claim that, because they understand the original political contexts in which biblical texts were composed, they can identify political motivations of authors and therefore they can hold themselves up as ultimate authorities who, “unlike those they study, know what they are doing.” Levenson sees the Cootes succumbing to a
common temptation for historical-critical scholars: the “temptation
to interpret the text as ideology, that is, as only a justification for
political arrangements.” From this sort of perspective, the work
of learning from the golden calf narrative is accomplished once
the political motivations of those who opposed Jeroboam in the
Northern Kingdom, or opposed the Aaronide priesthood in the
Southern Kingdom, have been exposed. The Bible can seemingly
play no role in guiding readers toward the pursuit of the Good in
any other way. Rather, Levenson argues, “Power, Politics, and the
Making of the Bible slams shut many of the portals to transcendence
that religiously committed historical critics have, in a variety of ways,
been struggling to keep open since the Enlightenment.”

The Cootes, I imagine, could defend themselves against these
charges; at least by the time he wrote his 2008 essay, Robert Coote
would insist on uncertainty and disavow any mode of scholarship
that too readily shuts any “portals to transcendence.” Indeed, as he
indicates there, he encourages the cultivation of virtues through
exercises that include prayer before study; perhaps he might
courage his Jewish students to recite the words of the Kaddish
following a study session. Still, Levenson’s general concerns about
historical-critical scholarship are worth taking seriously. Scholars
certainly can, at times, slam shut portals of transcendence if they
insist that the meanings of sacred texts are limited to the political
motivations of their authors, and if they disparage readers who study
texts in pursuit of a vision of the Good that extends “beyond all
of the blessings and hymns and praises and consolations that are
spoken in the world.”

Historical-critical scholars may sometimes see themselves as
philosophers in the style of the “Enlightenment”—philosophers
who bring light into the cave, helping to turn prisoners around so
that prisoners can see the puppeteers who have created myths simply
to legitimate their own power. The former prisoners may feel that they have been fully freed from their bondage, but their “enlighteners” are not in fact teaching them to seek portals that would allow them to glance beyond the cave. Scholars may, in fact, be re-enslaving prisoners under new assumptions, positioning themselves as the new puppeteers—who may not be seeking to transmit the Good to the prisoners at all, but may rather be (unconsciously or consciously) asserting their own power. “Might it be the case that the interpretation of religion as only a mystification of power arrangements,” Levenson asks, “is itself an item in a discourse of power in which a new group, supported by new social arrangements, asserts its hegemony?”

Levenson’s criticism of historical critics—as he puts it, “suspecting the hermeneuts of suspicion” (or, in the language of Peter Berger, “relativizing the relativizers”)—offers an important corrective for those historical critics who overrate the enlightening powers of their criticism. Historical criticism can help cultivate the many virtues that Coote has named, and it can help to inspire the pursuit of the Good for all the reasons that I have suggested above. But it is limited in the way that all human traditions are limited, and it emphasizes intellectual virtues while generally doing little to aid in the development of moral virtues. Simḥah Zissel Ziv would surely have developed a greater intellectual openness if he were to have studied the golden calf narrative with historical-critical scholars in a contemporary academic setting; but, so too, we could imagine historical-critical scholars benefitting from meditating on the golden calf narrative as was done in Simḥah Zissel’s yeshivas, where the ideal of continual moral growth was above all linked with virtues of lovingkindness and compassion that are often overlooked in contemporary academic settings. Many critical scholars would surely find Simḥah Zissel to be stiff-necked, “not able to turn his neck to listen,” “not able to turn from the habit to which he had been habituated”; but many critical scholars would also have
their own resistances to turning their own necks to the moral horizons toward which a thinker like Simḥah Zissel would point. All of us, wherever we stand, would do well to realize the limitations of our own visions of learning and seek to grow further. Those of us seeking to contribute to the Jewish tradition might benefit from turning to the words of the Kaddish after study, reminding ourselves of how far we are from the infinite goodness represented by “the name of the Holy One” and how we are obligated to continue to grow and learn.

Conclusions: Revisiting Rava and His Legacy

The human obligation to magnify and sanctify God’s name in the world—to increase goodness in the world—is an obligation that can be fulfilled through many paths. There are many ways that goodness can be increased in the world, so that “God’s great name” is “magnified and sanctified.” But study can play a key role in the process; for Jews, it is appropriate that engagement with Torah is linked with the Kaddish and the hope for the sanctification of God’s name in the world. The study of Torah can provide a vision of striving in pursuit of the moral ideal that God’s name represents, as Simḥah Zissel Ziv found in the golden calf story. The study of Torah can also point to the limits of humanly shaped Torah and the way in which God’s infinite name points us beyond those limitations. The words of the Kaddish can remind us of how distant we are from this infinite goodness, but can also remind us that we are obligated to continue to reach toward its light, even though we know that we will never reach it.

As we have seen, Rava first pointed to the illuminating power of the words of the Kaddish amidst the darkness that followed the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. We might join him in
hoping that the study of sacred texts and the words of the Kaddish can provide light and hope, and we might join him in thinking about how these words function for Jews who today continue to have no central Jerusalem Temple.

By directing his students’ attention to ways in which study could sustain the world, Rava may have been turning their attention away from the Temple—perhaps responding, in part, to Jews who thought that the Temple marked the one spot on earth that could serve as a true portal to God’s infinite goodness. As I have suggested in this essay, one might learn through study to doubt that narrative regarding the significance of the Jerusalem Temple. Through study, one might come to see the Temple as a concession following the golden calf episode and not as an ideal form—but one might also join Maimonides in appreciating the need for concessions when dealing with stiff-necked human beings, and affirm that the Temple could indeed provide a path to God. Or, through study, one might come to see the Jerusalem Temple as the project of kings and priests seeking political power, buttressed by narratives like the golden calf narrative that ridiculed and sought to delegitimize alternative temples—but one might also join Jon Levenson in understanding that texts and traditions outlive the political motivations that may have led to their creation. The words of the Kaddish may remind us that the texts and traditions that we study reflect limited perspectives and that God transcends them; but they may also remind us that these texts and traditions have the potential to guide us toward that transcendent horizon.

The recitation of the Kaddish is itself a tradition that has outlived the motivations that may have led to its creation. Rava himself may well have thought that the darkness of the world would ultimately be dispelled if “God’s kingdom” (a phrase also used in the Kaddish) were established through the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem and the reinstitution of its sacrificial system. But his effort to highlight
the power of study can inspire new hopes for how the darkness of the world can, instead, be slowly challenged through study itself—if study is carried out with all the virtues that it requires and opens up new portals for moral goodness in the world, making the world more like a world that we could call “God’s kingdom.”

For those of us today who see God’s great name as a moral archetype toward which we are called, we need all the reminders that we can get to always be more thoughtful, more loving, and more just, and reminding ourselves of God’s great name can be a source of inspiration. The Kaddish offers us no promises of enlightenment or redemption, but its words may guide us to look for insight and for glimpses of the Good—encounters with God—in all of our studies.
NOTES

1 A doxology is a statement of praise. On the Kaddish as a “closing doxology” after study, see David De Sola Pool, *The Old Jewish-Aramaic Prayer: The Kaddish* (Leipzig: Rudolf Haupt, 1909), pp. 8–9. This volume has been reprinted as *The Kaddish* (Jerusalem: Sivan Press, 1964).

2 B. Sotah 49a.


11 Ibid., p. 7. On the limited vision even of great prophets, see Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’ Guide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University


14 Based on the NJPS translation, following modifications suggested by Martin S. Cohen.


18 On the idea of “turning around,” see ibid., book 7 (518c–d), p. 197.

19 Maimonides, *Guide*, III 32 (vol. 2, p. 526). See also I 1 (vol. 1, p. 8), in discussing the transmission of insights: “Know that whenever one of the perfect wishes to mention, either orally or in writing, something that he understands of these secrets, according to the degree of his perfection, he is unable to explain with complete clarity and coherence even the portion that he has apprehended.” On the link between this discussion and the Allegory of the Cave, see Kenneth Seeskin, *Searching for a Distant God: The Legacy of Maimonides* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 36. Seeskin writes: “Like the prisoner in Plato’s cave who sees the sun and returns to tell his fellow prisoners about it, those who are fortunate enough to receive these insights have trouble communicating them to others.” See also Alan Mittleman, *Human Nature and Jewish Thought: Judaism’s Case for Why Persons Matter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 92–93.


23 Leviticus Rabbah 10:3. The language of “rebuke” is used in the language of Rashi on Exodus 32:5, s.v. *va-yomer*.


30 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 34.

31 See ibid., vol. 1, p. 137.

32 Simḥah Zissel highlights these virtues in a section of text that culminates with his discussion of the golden calf and the obligation to continue to grow and learn; see ibid., vol. 1, p. 31.

33 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 344. As Martin S. Cohen has pointed out to me, this idea is also reflected in the Aramaic phrase tzurba mei-rabbanan.

34 As Rashi explains (commenting on Exodus 34:11, s.v. *v’shab ev ha-maḥaneh*), the sin of the golden calf occurs on the seventeenth of Tammuz; after burning the calf and punishing the sinners, Moses ascends the mountain and seeks forgiveness amidst divine anger for forty days, until the first day of the month of Elul. On the first of Elul, a new forty-day period begins, which are days of divine favor. That period of divine favor culminates with God’s complete forgiveness of the sin of the golden calf on the tenth of Tishrei, the Day of Atonement. As Rashi explains, “On the tenth of Tishrei the blessed Holy One was placated toward Israel, joyfully and whole-heartedly, and [God] said to Moses, ‘I have forgiven in accordance with your words’ (Numbers 14:20).” The language of Numbers 14:20 is assumed to refer to the golden calf episode. Rashi, relying on Seder Olam 6 and Tanhuma *Ki Tissa* §31, explains the same basic timeline in his comments on Deuteronomy 9:18, s.v. *va-etnappal*.

35 For some of the models of meditation used for contemplating biblical and
rabbinic insights in Simḥah Zissel’s yeshivas, see Claussen, Sharing the Burden, p. 17. Among the methods that I discuss there is one that involves meditation “on the descriptions of God’s moral goodness so that [students] could meditate on these ideals and consider their own personal potential for improvement.” The practice of meditating on the divine attributes of goodness that were revealed following the sin of the golden calf was emphasized during the period leading up to the Day of Atonement and especially on the High Holy Days themselves; see Dov Katz, T’nu∙at Ha-Musar, 2nd ed., (Tel-Aviv: Beitain Ha-Sefer, 1952), vol. 2, pp. 176–177. I focus on Simḥah Zissel’s understanding of divine attributes and striving to imitate them in Sharing the Burden, pp. 113–124.

36 NJPS translation.
37 Claussen, Sharing the Burden, pp. 89 and 194.
39 NJPS translation; my italics.
41 On the rabbinic recognition of how authority is constructed through Moses’ attribution of this call to God, see Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1955), p. 269.
42 For a more extensive list of enigmas associated with this passage, see Friedman, Who Wrote the Bible?, p. 71.
43 Robert Coote, “Critical Perspective in Biblical Studies,” in Spotlight on Theological Education (Religious Studies News) 2, no. 1 (March 2008), p. viii. Coote teaches at the San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union in California. I would assume that the majority of his students are Christians, though he does not specify this; nor have I seen him specify his own religious commitments in his writing.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., p. xii.
47 Published in that year by Fortress Press in Minneapolis.
48 Jon D. Levenson, The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism:
As Coote specifies in “Critical Perspective in Biblical Studies,” p. viii: “I begin my introductory class with a prayer for virtues, or qualities of character, that contribute to critical learning….I endeavor both to model these qualities and to encourage them in students.”

52 See Bloom, “Interpretive Essay,” p. 403: “The Enlightenment, taken literally, believed that the light could be brought into the cave and the shadows dispelled; men, in that view, could live in perfect light. This Socrates denies; the philosopher does not bring light to the cave.”


54 Ibid. “Hermeneuts of suspicion” are, here, interpreters (“hermeneuts”) who interpret biblical texts by distrusting their claims and suspecting biblical authors of only seeking their own power. As Levenson is pointing out, one might suspect that such interpreters are in fact themselves seeking their own power as they claim to offer their own authoritative understandings of reality; one might, of course, continue the chain of suspicion by suspecting Levenson’s own suspicions, and so on. The concept of a “hermeneutic of suspicion” was first developed by Paul Ricoeur with reference to Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche; see Paul Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 32–35.


56 I discuss these virtues in Claussen, Sharing the Burden, esp. pp. 141–168. I do think, however, that many aspects of these virtues were also overlooked in Simḥah Zissel’s yeshivas; see ibid., pp. 176–181, 191–192, and 194–195.

57 As quoted above, these are the vices that Simḥah Zissel himself emphasizes in Sefer Hokhmah U-musar, vol. 2, p. 245.

58 See Sharing the Burden, p. 193.