

Absurdity and Meaning in Contemporary Philosophy and Jewish Thought

There is a lively discussion in contemporary philosophy that explores the meaning of life or, more modestly, meaning in life. Philosophers, for the most part, assume that religion has little to contribute to this inquiry. They believe that the Western religions, such as Judaism, have doctrinaire beliefs which have become implausible and can no longer satisfy the search for meaning. In this book, Alan L. Mittleman argues that this view is misconceived. He offers a presentation of core Jewish beliefs by using classical and contemporary texts that address the question of the meaning of life in a philosophical spirit. That spirit includes profound self-questioning and self-criticism. Such beliefs are not doctrinaire: Jewish sources, such as the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes, are, in fact, open to an absurdist reading. Mittleman demonstrates that both philosophy and Judaism are prone to ineliminable doubts and perplexities. Far from pre-empting a conversation, they promote honest dialogue.

ALAN L. MITTLEMAN is Aaron Rabinowitz and Simon H. Rifkind Emeritus Professor of Jewish Philosophy at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America. He is the author of *Hope in a Democratic Age* (Oxford University Press, 2009) and *Does Judaism Condone Violence? Holiness and Ethics in the Jewish Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-09826-7 — Absurdity and Meaning in Contemporary Philosophy
and Jewish Thought
Alan L. Mittleman
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Absurdity and Meaning in Contemporary Philosophy and Jewish Thought

ALAN L. MITTLEMAN

The Jewish Theological Seminary of America



Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-09826-7 — Absurdity and Meaning in Contemporary Philosophy
and Jewish Thought
Alan L. Mittleman
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009098267

DOI: 10.1017/9781009099400

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment 2023

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2023

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

A Cataloging-in-Publication data record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 978-1-009-09826-7 Hardback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

Acknowledgments	<i>page</i> vi
Introduction	1
1 The Question of the Meaning of Life	48
2 Creation	120
3 Revelation	165
4 Redemption	220
Conclusion	268
Bibliography	276
Index	283

Acknowledgments

Some wonderful people and institutions helped me to think about and write this book. My academic home, the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), in addition to being a congenial environment to work on questions of meaning, religion, and philosophy also gave me a yearlong sabbatical at a critical point in the work. That sabbatical was also made possible by the Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University, which granted me a fellowship in 2020–2021. Although the worst of the pandemic precluded in person meetings, my cohort met weekly online. I got to share many ideas and an early draft among friends. Thanks also go to my students at JTS who signed up for a course I taught twice on “The Meaning of Life in Modern Jewish Thought.” This was invaluable for gaining greater clarity about the issues and translating between often abstruse philosophical metalevel discussions and the concerns of actual human beings. I thank my editor at Cambridge University Press, Beatrice Rehl, for her encouragement and the anonymous readers, who helped me to refine the project. For advice and insight into the Book of Ecclesiastes, I had a number of fruitful discussions with Tamara Eskenazi. Other helpful discussion partners were Todd Moody, Catherine Chalier, Benjamin Schvarcz, Yoni Brafman, Arthur Kover, Amanda Greene, Alex Green, Tom Angier, the late Richard Claman, Alan Astrow, Jonathan Moss, Michael Morgan, Leora Batnitzky, Tzvi Novick, Paul Steiner, and Arnie Eisen. I am deeply grateful to my partner, Annette Aronowicz, who carefully read the entire manuscript (twice!) and offered penetrating comments, criticism – and ongoing moral support.

I dedicate the book to my late wife, Patti Mittleman (1959–2018). By emphasizing the ethical dimensions of meaning, I tried to capture something of Patti’s spirit and moral passion. Her life was marked

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-09826-7 — Absurdity and Meaning in Contemporary Philosophy
and Jewish Thought
Alan L. Mittleman
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS vii

by great seriousness, courage, love, devotion, and unflagging energy despite harsh health challenges. My sons, Ari and Joel, and I miss her deeply. I dedicate this book as well to my terrific grandchildren, Adrian and Eden Shira Mittleman-Levin and Elicia Galit Mittleman. They bring great light to my life. May they live meaningful lives in a world worthy of their promise.