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## AUTONOMY IN JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

*Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy* examines an important theme in Jewish thought from the Book of Genesis to the present day. Although it is customary to view Judaism as a legalistic faith which leaves little room for free thought or individual expression, Kenneth Seeskin argues that that view is wrong. Where some see the essence of the religion as strict obedience to divine commands, Seeskin claims that God does not just command but forms a partnership with humans requiring the consent of both parties. Looking at classic texts from Biblical, Rabbinic, and philosophical literature, Seeskin shows that Judaism has always respected freedom of conscience and assigned an important role to the power of human reason.

The book both considers existing arguments and presents new ideas about the role of autonomy in Judaism. Clear and concise, it offers a refreshing alternative to the mysticism and dogmatism prevalent in much of the recent literature.

KENNETH SEESKIN is Professor of Philosophy at Northwestern University, Illinois. He has published widely in the area of Jewish philosophy and his books include *Searching for a Distant God: The Legacy of Maimonides* (2000), *Jewish Philosophy in a Secular Age* (1990), *Maimonides: A Guide for Today's Perplexed* (1991), *No Other Gods* (1995) and *Dialogue and Discovery: A Study in Socratic Method* (1987).

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KENNETH SEESKIN

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*To  
Joseph Edelheit*

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## *Preface*

This is a book I have wanted to write ever since I began to think about Jewish philosophy in a serious way. Where some see the essence of the religion as obedience to a commanding God, I see it differently. God does not *just* command. If that were all God did, we would be worshiping a dictator not a perfect being. Rather God forms a partnership with humans that requires the consent of both parties.

The standard objection to my view is that it is a transparent attempt to read the ideas of liberal democracy into the sacred literature. Needless to say, I think the objection is false. The Biblical narrative shows that humans are given more freedom in their dealings with God than philosophers of religion generally acknowledge. More important, the normal metaphor for the relation between God and humans is not the making of an edict but the joining together of two people in matrimony. I submit that what philosophers typically call “revelation” is more complicated than a list of imperatives saying “Do this” and “Don’t do that.” At the very least, it is an agreement that takes into account the dignity of both parties. Without this agreement, we may have lightning, thunder, and a booming voice from the top of a mountain, but we would not have action worthy of a divine being.

As usual I wish to thank my personal “varsity” for helpful comments on every stage of this project. They include: Cristina D’Ancona Costa, Joseph Edelheit, Lenn Goodman, Julie P. Gordon, Menachem Kellner, David Novak, and Josef Stern. I also would like to thank people whose writing allowed me to articulate my view with greater precision. They include: Henry

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*Preface*

Allison, David Hartman, Christine Korsgaard, J. B. Schneewind, Moshe Sokol, Allen Wood, and last, but not least, the late Steven S. Schwarzschild. Finally I wish to express my perpetual gratitude to the Academy for Jewish Philosophy.

## *Abbreviations*

Where both German and English editions are cited in the text page numbers are shown in the references as, for example, (*FMM* 400, p. 16) with the German edition cited first.

<i>BMM</i>	Martin Buber, <i>Between Man and Man</i>
<i>CF</i>	Immanuel Kant, <i>The Conflict of the Faculties</i>
<i>CPR</i>	Immanuel Kant, <i>Critique of Pure Reason</i>
<i>CPrR</i>	Immanuel Kant, <i>Critique of Practical Reason</i>
<i>DF</i>	Emmanuel Levinas, <i>Difficult Freedom</i>
<i>DH</i>	Bahya ibn Pakudah, <i>Duties of the Heart</i>
<i>EFP</i>	Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy"
<i>EG</i>	Martin Buber, <i>Eclipse of God</i>
<i>FFL</i>	Richard A. Cohen (ed.), <i>Face to Face With Levinas</i>
<i>FMM</i>	Immanuel Kant, <i>Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals</i>
<i>GAP</i>	Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy"
<i>IT</i>	Martin Buber, <i>I and Thou</i>
<i>J</i>	Moses Mendelssohn, <i>Jerusalem</i>
<i>JS</i>	Hermann Cohen, <i>Jüdische Schriften</i>
<i>GP</i>	Maimonides, <i>The Guide of the Perplexed</i>
<i>HJP</i>	Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (eds.), <i>History of Jewish Philosophy</i>
<i>MM</i>	Immanuel Kant, <i>The Metaphysics of Morals</i>
<i>MT</i>	Maimonides, <i>Mishneh Torah</i>
<i>OTB</i>	Emmanuel Levinas, <i>Otherwise than Being</i>
<i>PII</i>	Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite"
<i>PJ</i>	Julius Guttmann, <i>The Philosophy of Judaism</i>

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<i>PMB</i>	Martin Buber, <i>The Philosophy of Martin Buber</i> , edited by Paul Arthur Schilpp
<i>RR</i>	Hermann Cohen, <i>Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism</i>
<i>RWL</i>	Immanuel Kant, <i>Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone</i>
<i>SR</i>	Franz Rosenzweig, <i>The Star of Redemption</i>
<i>TI</i>	Emmanuel Levinas, <i>Totality and Infinity</i>
<i>TTP</i>	Baruch de Spinoza, <i>A Theologico-Political Treatise</i>