

Foreword

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In a recent radio interview, the eminent Nobel Prize–winning neuroscientist Eric Kandel was asked to speculate about new directions for his discipline in the decades to come. This was his response: “I envision a multiplicity of fields branching out from neuroscience, fields such as neuro-aesthetics, neuro-ethics, neuro-anthropology. . . .” To which I responded, speaking to myself as I listened in my living room, “and neuro-theology.”

In many ways, it was Kandel’s work that prompted me to view neuroscience as the key discipline for understanding human behavior and community. The reality is that everything human beings do is affected by our minds—or, if you wish, by our brains. Therefore, there is a neuroscientific dimension to our entire life experience.

Reading Rabbis Wiener and Hirschmann’s *Maps and Meaning* has expanded my perspective. In one way or another, the issues that emerge in the following pages also affect our entire life experience. These considerations can be profitably read not only by

neuroscientists but also by anthropologists and sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, and, of course, by theologians. The singular accomplishment of this work is to expand the range of our understanding of what, until now, has been read as simply biblical religion or ancient Judaism. While this book devotes some space to the laws of levitical purity and to Israel's communal structure as it marched through the wilderness to the promised land, its purpose is to encompass the much broader scope of the human experience as a whole. In this way, their study opens up the conversation to include the widest possible range of humanistic studies.

It is, therefore, highly desirable that this book be read, studied, and appreciated by an audience far beyond people who seek a wider understanding of ancient Judaism. In effect, Rabbis Wiener and Hirschmann have read the Bible from a new perspective that pulls together much of contemporary scholarship on the way human beings live and make sense of their lives. This study reflects the academic work of a number of disciplines, including all of the social sciences. What the authors have succeeded in doing is nourishing their reading of biblical texts with material from all of these disciplines. More importantly, they bring biblical material and these contemporary disciplines into conversation with each other. In so doing, they have brought the Jewish study practice of *chevruta*, of studying aloud in pairs, to a new area of discourse, placing the biblical text, its accompanying commentaries, and cultural, historical, and personal associations into dialogue with one another.

As I consider how ancient Judaism structured space, time, and community, as well as the rituals used to communicate these structures to the community at large, I reflect on how this structuring of space is echoed in my life. In particular, the authors' discussion of the complex of rituals related to exiting and entering the biblical *machaneh*—literally, the “camp”—resonate with my recent experiences

with illness. Being “outside the camp” as I spent time in the hospital for treatments has deepened my own understanding of what it is to be at home, or inside the camp. More than simply being in a distinctive physical space, being inside the camp means being in a situation where everything is familiar, where your comfort is guaranteed, and where it becomes possible for you to achieve whatever it is you feel you were meant to achieve.

Maps and Meaning has helped me clarify the use of ritual as a structuring device, as well as the impact this pattern has had on my own personal life experience. A small but meaningful example: when in the hospital, I regularly resist the demand that I put on a gown. Wearing a gown not only ritually marks that I am in unfamiliar territory, but its symbolic resonance also transports me spiritually to the striped pajamas of the concentration camp. Conversely, putting on my own clothes now has meaning far beyond wearing something familiar and comfortable; it is the first step in the longed-for process of reentering the familiar territory I call home.

Rabbis Wiener and Hirschmann’s unique accomplishment, then, has been not only to illuminate biblical Judaism but also to probe deeply into the ways in which doctrines and rituals affect the everyday life of the wider community. In the broadest sense, this book is about how doctrines and rituals have a transformative effect on the state of mind of the members of that community. In addition to this, *Maps and Meaning* takes us beyond a new understanding of a purely social-science appreciation of biblical religion. It also explicitly addresses professional caregivers, for whom it will serve as a mind-broadening experience and a source of more profound appreciation of their lives’ work. Whether in our personal or professional lives, we have all experienced shifts in our states of being or our spheres of function. This book gives all of us a deeper understanding of the many ways we negotiate life’s transitions, and of how our choices

about honoring these transitions affect our understandings of our selves, the world, and the transcendent.