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September 26, 2008: No, You Don't Live an Exemplary Life

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Title: No, You Don't Live an Exemplary Life

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9/26/2008--Steven Weinberg, Nobel Laureate in Physics who teaches at the University of Texas, recently wrote a piece in the New York Review of Books (September 25) on living without God. This is the same Steven Weinberg whom Stuart Kauffman identifies in *Reinventing the Sacred* as a leading apostle of reductionism. Kauffman quotes Weinberg's "two famous dicta": "The explanatory arrows always point downward [to physics]" and "The more we comprehend the universe, the more pointless it seems." It appears that Weinberg trots out the same article every once in awhile, and he has certainly done so in the NYR. I responded to Weinberg in a letter to the editor and if the magazine does not publish it, I will post it here. But there was an odd sideline to Weinberg's piece that bears noting now, in the season of the Jewish High Holy Days coming next week. Weinberg wrote the following in the article: "I do not think we have to worry that giving up religion will lead to a moral decline. There are plenty of people without religious faith who live exemplary moral lives (as for example, me), and though religion has sometimes inspired admirable ethical standards, it has also often fostered the most hideous crimes." Was Weinberg kidding? I hope so. Certainly it is true that religion has inspired and does inspire horrendous crimes. But who lives an exemplary moral life? Weinberg? You? Me? Exemplary means, according to my computer, "so good or admirable that others would do well to copy it." Weinberg does not mean that. He just means, as secularists usually do when they say they do not need religion to lead a good life, that he has not killed anyone or robbed a bank. This is the dumbing down of secular morality. Weinberg has not led an exemplary moral life. Just like the rest of us, he has lived a life of self-interest in which he has harmed many people and has almost always put himself first. I say this without knowing Weinberg, because it is true of all of us, including religious people. It is called sin, original or otherwise. If you want to see an exemplary moral life, read the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25.). When you find someone like that, call me. Two points should be made here. First, we do need religion to live moral lives. We need the examples of saints even to live moderately well. Second, we need forgiveness. It is destructive to think of ourselves as good. It is bad for individuals and disastrous for nations. Judaism is good about these points. They are at the heart of the High Holy Days.