

# *The Reconstructionist*

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## FROM THE EDITOR

### About This Issue

This issue comes to you in a new format and with a new sense of purpose. Our goal is to address issues of significance to the Reconstructionist movement and to stimulate fresh approaches within the contemporary American Jewish community. Our means to this end will be to encourage in these pages a diversity of voices and to promote among them a healthy debate. In this way, we hope to help Reconstructionism, both as a movement and as a school of thought, think through the complex issues facing us as late twentieth-century American Jews.

Formerly published by the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot (FRCH), *The Reconstructionist* is now published by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in conjunction with the two other arms of our movement, FRCH and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association. FRCH members and affiliates are being served by another publication, *Reconstructionism Today*, addressed directly to the needs of its members for hands-on information about Reconstructionist approaches to Jewish practice. Practice, of course, is not divorced from theory, and it is the job of *The Reconstructionist*, now subtitled "a journal of contemporary Jewish thought and practice," to air the theories that will eventually be translated into the evolving practices of contemporary Jews both in the Reconstructionist movement and beyond.

Each number of *The Reconstructionist* will collect a group of essays on a single topic. We chose the topic of naming and imaging God to accompany the publication in Spring, 1994 of *Shabbat Vehagim*, the newest in our *Kol Haneshamah* series of prayerbooks. The new siddur invites worshipers at several points to consider tailoring the formulas of *berakhot*/blessings to suit an individual's theology. In that spirit, we have invited a number of theologians to share their thinking on how naming and imaging God contributes to their own spiritual awareness of the divine in the world.

The first group of essays is broadly focused around the challenges of contemporary prayer, taking the *Kol Haneshamah* prayerbook series as one focus, among others. The second group of essays is more specifically focused on naming and imaging God from a variety of perspectives. Finally, the issue is rounded out with the story of a personal journey and with an essay-review on recent works of Jewish theology that suggest directions for further reading and reflection on the topics treated here.

This collection of essays is somewhat longer than the journal will normally be in order to include the most important strands in contemporary Reconstructionism: religious naturalism, feminism, and the influence of kabbalah and neo-hasidism. We draw on our roots in Kaplan, yet we also look to the future

of theological exploration with an inquiry into the nature of post-modernism. As part of our pluralist self-understanding, we have reached out to some writers not officially allied with our movement in order to be in dialogue with a wide spectrum of contemporary Jewish thought.

A close reading of these essays will find that they generate considerable controversy. To give a few brief examples that may whet your appetites: David Teutsch's essay elaborates on the need to create new formulas for *berakhot*/blessings, while Marcia Falk disparages the very idea of formulas. Marcia Prager advocates finding a personal relationship to God, while Daniel Matt argues that not only is the idea of a personal relationship to God illusory, but so, for that matter, is the idea of a personal self. Richard Hirsh advocates liturgical change in English to reflect Kaplanian naturalism, while asking that we leave the Hebrew alone to accommodate our feelings for *klal Yisrael*, while Tikva Frymer-Kensky explores the masculinist biases that must inevitably be entailed in such a position. These are but a few of the many arguments "for the sake of Heaven" that we hope will be promoted by this new format of *The Reconstructionist*.

It is quite significant that several of the essays' titles begin with the word "beyond." While contemporary Jews are making a concerted effort to use the language and prayer traditions they inherit to their maximum capacity, there is a widespread sense, shared among these essays, that language is only a tool pointing in the direction of divinity and spirituality. Beyond language is a silent reality that awaits our exploration.

### **About Future Issues**

The next issue(s) of *The Reconstructionist* will focus on the theme of negotiating boundaries. We will deal with boundaries in the areas of membership (Jews and Christians) and ideology (Jews and Buddhists). Essays on synagogue process (rabbis and laity) and liturgy (tradition and innovation) have also been commissioned.

In the coming year, to celebrate this magazine's sixtieth anniversary, we will refocus our attention on the work of Mordecai Kaplan, by turning Kaplanian lenses onto the concerns and tasks facing us in 1995 and beyond. In particular, we will examine the sort of communities we would like to build and what we see as standing in the way of building those communities.

Inquiries about possible articles for these issues should be sent to the editor, Dr. Herb Levine, at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Letters responding to articles in this magazine should be sent to the editor; they will be edited and printed according to the availability of space. Orders for subscriptions (\$35 for four issues; reduced 20% for members of FRCH and FRCH-affiliates) should be sent *c/o The Reconstructionist*, Church Road and Greenwood Avenue, Wyncote, PA. 19095.

# Some Call It God

BY SIDNEY H. SCHWARZ

For the past three years I have taught a course at the local Jewish Community Center on "Exploring Jewish Spirituality." Typical courses get ten to twenty registrants; this course has attracted sixty to seventy. About half are affiliated with synagogues. When I ask, "how many of you would say that your synagogue experience has been spiritually satisfying," very few hands remain in the air. When I ask how many of you have explored other religious/spiritual disciplines, over half raise their hands. Some were part of the pool of synagogue members; most were not.

The synagogue world, the primary vehicle delivering Judaism to Jews in America, has failed in its mission to teach our heritage in a way that is spiritually compelling. Likewise, large numbers of Jews have taken to exploring a myriad of other religious/spiritual paths. Both the findings of the National Jewish Population Study (1990) and a more recent sociological study on American religious mores<sup>1</sup> bear this out. Since millions of dollars are currently being spent on outreach to marginally affiliated and unaffiliated Jews, it would seem logical to

spend some energy in discovering how *batey tefilah*, houses of Jewish prayer, can become more inviting places to Jews who are seeking a spiritual dimension to their lives.

The problem of spiritually dead synagogues knows no denominational boundaries. All rabbis and prayer leaders must better understand what Jews are looking for within a religious institution to meet their spiritual hunger. I dare say that if only 10% of the money that Jews currently spend at ashrams, Buddhist retreats, mass therapy experiences and in psycho-spiritual counseling, were spent in the synagogue orbit, we would see a renaissance of Jewish religious life in America that would stagger the imagination.

Allow me to make some suggestions to take us down that road.

## God Talk-God Babble

When I ask my spirituality classes if they believe in God, about half raise their hands, albeit tentatively. This is a good start because part of what I later teach them is that this is not only a bad question, it is the wrong question. When however, I ask them how many

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have had profound and life affirming spiritual experiences, virtually all of the hands shoot up. Only after I ask this somewhat ambiguous question do we begin to explore what we mean by the term "spiritual." Answers vary, but they fall along a clear line: a sense of oneness, a relationship to something greater than oneself, an ability to transcend the everyday, a sense of inner self and inner peace, and a feeling of being part of some universal consciousness. And all this from people who are not sure that they believe in God!

Is anyone speaking a language that these Jews can relate to?

Our Reconstructionist theological legacy here is very rich indeed. From Mordecai Kaplan's transnaturalism to Harold Schulweis' predicate theology to Arthur Green's neo-hasidism, Reconstructionism can stake claim to some of the most creative theological thinking of this century. Each of these three theological positions moves us beyond an overtly supernatural and hierarchical vision of God to one that is increasingly humanistic and horizontal. They allow us to take our experiences of life and see them in transcendent dimensions. When I read the New Age and Eastern religious texts that seem to capture the imagination of so many Jews, I tell the people who share them with me how beautiful are the insights of these books and traditions, and then I guide them to parallels in the Jewish tradition.

We are losing Jews because the theological models that are being put

forth continue to be largely literalist and fundamentalist, despite Reconstructionists' having rejected these models over seventy years ago. Today there is an explosion of books and courses about God in the Jewish community. But I still don't see rabbis and synagogues translating this sophisticated thinking about God to the places where it matters most—the congregational school and religious worship. I am convinced that Reconstructionism is uniquely prepared to bring such a sophisticated theological message to Jews who hunger for one.

Too many rabbis respond to the current upsurge of interest in God and spirituality by simply using the G-word more frequently from the pulpit. I am afraid that this comes across to most Jews as merely God-babble. We turn-off when we cannot relate to the God that is being invoked. Rabbis must connect the G-word to the very real experiences of Jews. Since we rabbis mean different things when we use the G-word in different contexts, we must explicate our code. I cannot now use the G-word without an explanation that sounds apologetic. But I gladly accept this fate because, in my experience, it has meant that people don't automatically turn off when I use the term "God". Instead, they are brought to a far better question than "do I believe in God?" They ask themselves, "what experience in my life can I associate with what our ancestors called "God"?"

*Kol Haneshamah*, the new Reconstructionist liturgical series, is a pioneering work in this regard. By utiliz-

ing different attributes for God each time a Hebrew name for God is translated, worshippers can have their understanding broadened by the infinite number of ways we can see a transcendent power manifested in our lives and in our worlds.

### Liturgy: From Prison to Gateway

What rabbis say or don't say is only one part of the problem. We all know too well our problem with our liturgy. We can't live with it, and we can't live without it. On the one hand, the language is so hierarchical, supernaturalist and male-oriented that it at least confirms, if not creates, the fundamentalist assumptions about God that turn off so many Jews. On the other hand, to jettison the better part of that inherited liturgy is to rob our generation and future generations of Jews of a critical link to our past. We are, after all, perpetuating a tradition with a three thousand year-old history. Even Mordecai Kaplan, in his editing of the first series of Reconstructionist liturgy, could not bring himself to alter the basic *barukh ata Adonay* formula, even though we could make the case that retaining it undermined much of what he wanted to convey theologically.

For most Jews, therefore, the Jewish liturgy is a prison. It is constricting. It suffocates. It is boring. English translations, when they are good ones, help a bit. Alternative versions of prayers help much more. When we are able to express the essence of a traditional prayer in a way that relates to the real

experience of people, then suddenly the prayer becomes not only a link to our past, but also a gateway to express and make more meaningful something that has been lived. The richness and beauty of the traditional liturgy sits behind a locked door. We must provide the key.

Some examples. In the *ahavah rabah* prayer, we express the hope that, "we will one day be brought in peace from the four corners of the earth and be able to live in dignity in the land of Israel." I use this passage to talk about how prayers can, in fact, be realized. A prayer that has been said for centuries now becomes a prophecy anticipating the miraculous arrival of Jews from Russia, Ethiopia, and the former Yugoslavia to the land of Israel. Who cannot marvel at the poignancy of such a prayer? Who would not to recite it today as a celebration of a dream, at least partially fulfilled?

Many congregations are involved in social action work. It is the way that Jews and others do "God's work" in this world. But the experience can be made more spiritual by connecting it with prayer. Envision bringing a group of congregants to a homeless shelter where they are engaged in the act of preparing meals, bringing clothing, offering medical assistance and providing companionship. Picture the group taking a few minutes before they leave to recite from the *amidah*: "You sustain the living with loving kindness, in great mercy you allow the (spiritually) dead to come alive; You support the fallen, heal the sick, free the captives and remain faithful to

those who sleep in the dust.” Suddenly a good deed becomes a *mitzvah* and a piece of traditional liturgy becomes a gateway to a world of ethical activity. The people who recite such a prayer *in situ*, will never see that prayer the same way again. Everytime it is recited, it will remind them of that particular experience, and give them an incentive to find other ways to do such *mitzvot* again.

A third example. I sometimes use the morning prayer *modeh ani* to explore how we can express gratitude for the singular gift of life. Meant to be recited immediately upon arising from sleep, the prayer reminds us that for our ancestors, sleep was a form of semi-death. When we awake, we express gratitude that the “breath of life” or our “unique soul/life force” has come back into our bodies. For those who have stood over the bed of a comatose patient, it is easy to understand that we have not changed much from our ancestors who authored this prayer. We still fear death, and are constantly reminded of the thin line that separates us from life’s end. The *modeh ani* prayer helps us to appreciate the great blessing of being alive, conscious, able to laugh and cry and love.

All of the above examples utilize traditional prayers. To the extent that one wants to work with contemporary prayers or alternative versions of the classical liturgy, the process that I describe here becomes even easier, although one loses some of the power that inheres in prayers that are ancient. The use of prayers as gate-

ways to expressions of spirituality does not presuppose any particular God belief, and certainly not a fundamentalist view of God.

Taking the time to open up the liturgy requires a willingness not to take liturgy for granted. Most synagogues are populated by two kinds of Jews: those for whom the traditional liturgy has always worked and has had meaning, and those who are waiting for the *kiddush* to pay their respects to the *bar/bat mitzvah* family. The first group of Jews would be enriched by the kinds of explanations described above. The second, much larger group of Jews have not come expecting any message. You might connect with them, but your chances are slim, because people need to be asking certain questions, before they will be interested in your answers.

If, however, you do not assume that the service will automatically work for that first group of those who attend, and you are willing to structure a service that presents prayers as gateways, seekers will come. It means that you won’t be able to *davven* every prayer all the time. It means allowing worshippers to ask questions in the midst of a service. It means bringing in texts and examples from prayer books that have not been approved by the ritual committee. So be it. This is not religious worship as it is delivered in synagogues across America, but it can be very spiritually exciting.

To break out of the prison of liturgy, we must move beyond the words in the prayer book. Literalism is the enemy of the spiritual experience. We

come to know God when we tune into the subtle but eternal truths of life: righteousness, kindness, birth, death, the inventor's genius, the tenor's perfect note, the majestic order of the galaxy and the intricate perfection of the human body. The "reality" of these aspects of life does not get affirmed in the physical realm; their "reality" exists in the spiritual realm. To "see" and appreciate these parts of life, one must acquire the third eye, which Hindus paint on their foreheads. To allow the prayerbook to speak to that level of our consciousness, we must learn to read the words of prayer with an eye for poetry and metaphor.

### Playing Shamash

The impact of the Havurah movement on American Judaism is well documented. Its ability to get Jews to accept ownership for their own Judaism and to create, celebrate and learn with little or no professional guidance stands as an important lesson to the established Jewish community. But it is remarkable how little most rabbis and synagogues have learned from the Havurah phenomenon. Most rabbis acknowledge the value of *havurot*, but see themselves inhabiting a totally different world. It is true that synagogue institutions do some things better than *havurot*, but most synagogues would benefit from a healthy dose of havurah-style egalitarianism that allows for many voices to be heard within a synagogue. This calls for the rabbi to become like the shamash on the *hanukkiab*—lighting

other candles so as to enable them to add their own light to the illumine the darkness.

I have long been an advocate for laypeople having a substantial voice within a synagogue. This is as necessary in defining worship as in congregational decision-making. It is an essential tenet of Reconstructionism that Judaism is shaped by the Jewish people. If we sincerely believe this, then we have to hear what Jews are saying. Using a sermon-dialogue approach to Torah study on Shabbat is one way to encourage congregants to see that their insights into Torah are as important to share as the rabbi's. We now need to go much further than this in helping congregants recognize their own spiritual voices.

As part of the practicum of my course on Jewish spirituality, the class is divided into dyads. I ask them to share a spiritual experience with their partner (often someone whom they hardly know). I tell students they can bring in a poem, a piece of music on tape, an object or artwork that has spiritual meaning for them. They spend about fifteen minutes sharing their spiritual "treasure" with their partner and then they have the opportunity to share with the entire group.

One person shares a poem that she has had in her wallet for twenty-five years. Another spontaneously performs a dance that she composed for a class of retarded adults. One person brings in a four-foot tall, brass *menorah*. She found it at a yard sale and had to buy it, because, to her mind, it deserved an honored place in a Jewish

home, not be left in some pile of junk in a backyard. Though she was born Jewish, she had no Jewish education and was a member of an ethical culture society. But from the day she bought the menorah, she set upon a mission to make her home a fitting Jewish abode for the menorah. Her taking the course was part of that journey.

I was not prepared for the power of this exercise. Nor was I the only one to sense the magic of those shared thoughts and experiences. Members of my synagogue who were in the class stayed late after we ended, and urged me to find some way to allow what happened in the class to take place in the context of our regular morning service. So we started a program at which, each week, a different member of the congregation chooses a prayer that she or he finds particularly meaningful. I ask them to share a life experience that makes that prayer come alive. By sharing that insight with the congregation, we begin to “open up” more and more liturgy to Jews for whom the Hebrew Siddur is mostly a closed book.

We also use life cycle occasions to allow members to share something personal with the congregation. Since ours is a young congregation, our most frequent life-cycle event is a covenant ceremony for newborns. After the parents receive an *aliyah*, they deliver a brief statement explaining who the child is being named after. So much of the power of religion and life cycle ritual is invested in the memories that we invoke of fami-

ly members who are deceased. Through the “name legacy,” not only do parents strengthen their connections to parents and grandparents, but they articulate the qualities that they then commit themselves to impart to their new children. When week after week I see tears well up in the eyes of congregants of all ages, I know that we are striking spiritual chords of great significance.

### “Good and Welfare”

Towards the end of our service, at the same time that I encourage visitors to stand up and introduce themselves, so that our members can reach out to them at *kiddush*, I invite members to share “good and welfare.” People get up and share good news and bad. We hear of people getting new jobs and getting laid off; of engagements, which lead to spontaneous applause, and of graduations. It is part of the work of building community, of making people feel comfortable sharing their lives with the rest of the congregation. Such sharing is often “rewarded” many times over by expressions of *mazal tov*, or the tendering of help.

Similarly, when we invite anyone who wants a prayer of healing for themselves or a loved one to come forward between the Torah reading and the *haftarah*, each has the opportunity to state the name of the person who is in their prayers. I have all those who assemble link arms during the chanting of Debbie Friedman’s *Misheberakh* prayer. I know that after the service, this public display of pain and prayerful hope is supported by the loving

approach of dozens of members who would otherwise remain unaware of the situation.

However insightful or inspiring a rabbi may be, if s/he structures a service so that only his/her voice is heard, the service will never reach its spiritual potential. People have locked up inside them the most profound spiritual experiences and insights, which can inspire just as much as a rabbi's words do. The rabbi's challenge is to provide a forum for the expression of such insights. Only when the leader holds back some of him or herself (read "ego") can other people blossom.<sup>2</sup>

There is no little danger that a service opened up for all manner of spiritual expression can drift very far from the *geva*, or regular format that would make it recognizable as a Jewish service. I am well aware of the danger of emotional exhibitionism and of some individuals seeking to dominate those parts of the service that allow for participation. There need to be limits and the rabbi should exercise such limits. But I think the far greater danger lies in religious worship that is exactly the same week after week, all *geva* and no *kavanah*. Most worship that goes on in all stripes of synagogues across America continues to be

top-down. Such worship obscures the light that is waiting to pour forth from the Jews who come to sense God's presence. If, as I believe, experiences of the spiritual realm come in an infinite number of varieties, the synagogue must invite different voices to express how that happens. Jews must share the rich gifts of their souls, their *neshomot*, with one another

As it now stands, most Jews experience their most spiritual moments outside the walls of the synagogue and outside the confines of Judaism. Tens of thousands of Jews are engaged in a serious search for places to support and nurture their quest for religious and spiritual truth. Reconstructionism has a theological language and religious style that is singularly equipped to meet this need. If we learn how to connect our language and style with Jewish seekers, we might find ourselves leading many Jews back to what some people call God. ♦

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1. Wade C. Roof, et. al., *A Generation of Seekers: Baby Boomers and the Quest for Spiritual Style* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993).

2. On this topic, see Eugene Borowitz, "TZIMTZUM: A Mystic Model for Contemporary Leadership," *Religious Education* 69 (1974), 687-700.

# Seeking God in the Siddur: Reflections on *Kol Haneshamah*

BY DAVID TEUTSCH

**W**e all use myth and metaphor to structure our lives and interpret reality. Language, our primary interpretive device, contains an elaborate mythic structure. Consider the sentences: "He had a brainstorm." "We want your input in this process." In these two sentences, the realms of nature and computers offer metaphors by which we process and understand reality. Even the seemingly neutral word "realms" in the previous sentence harks back to a political metaphor.

One of the major changes in our understanding of prayer over the last fifty years has been our growing recognition of the role myth and metaphor plays in prayer. A critical part of prayer is interpreting and explaining our world. We can say that *tefilah* embodies the Jewish understanding of reality. Jewish prayer must therefore speak in mythic language to portray our vision in its full vividness.

We speak of God as Creator in the *Yotzer* (*Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat*

*Vehagim*, pp.246-51). Mordecai Kaplan's "God the Life of Nature" (pp.757-59) retains much of the same mythic content as does the *Yotzer*—God as the source of unity in nature and of the power and intricacy that causes us to wonder at our world. To strip the liturgy of the language of Creation would remove mythic language critical not only to the structure of the liturgy, but to the Jewish worldview. Moreover, the *Shema* assumes the divine origin of that natural unity proclaimed in the *Yotzer*.

Creation, Revelation, and Redemption are central to the mythic structure of the Siddur. These three principles of Jewish thought and living—the world's unity, the existence of an objective morality that presumes the worth of human life, and the presence of meaning in history (strikingly explicated in Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*), were already embedded in the *halakhah* by the time of the Mishnah (*Berakhot* 1:4). With the modifications required by the Recon-

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structionist shift from classical supernaturalism (with an omniscient, just God concerned with particulars) to transnaturalism and naturalism, these principles remain just as central in Reconstructionist thought as in the classical rabbinic understanding. Retaining the mythic structure is not just a matter of maintaining continuity with the Jewish past for the purpose of preserving Jewish ethnicity. It charts the Jewish self-understanding in a way that guarantees an encounter with it every morning and evening that a Jew prays from the Siddur.

A literal understanding of Jewish myths results in believing in a supernatural God who created the world, gave an immutable Torah at Sinai, and will bring final justice and completeness to the world through a personal messiah at the end of time. This is obviously quite distant from a Reconstructionist understanding that there is a divine unity to the world that we can encounter in our evolving Torah, a unity that can lead toward improved human conduct and a world at peace. The literal understanding creates both intellectual and moral problems for most of us. Furthermore, it is so widespread—in the liturgy of all the other major Jewish movements—that we Reconstructionists believe it critical to dissociate ourselves from it.

## Living Myth and Praying Metaphor

How do we retain the powerful mythic structure while signaling our rejection of a literal interpretation of

it? That is a critically important and most difficult question. Consider how *Kol Haneshamah* deals with imaging the revelation at Sinai. When the Torah is raised after it has been read, a traditional congregation proclaims, *vezot hatorah asher sam Mosheh lifney beney Yisra'el al pi Adonay beyad Mosheh*. "This is the Torah that came to the people Israel from the mouth of God through the hand of Moses." The 1945 Reconstructionist *Sabbath Prayer Book* substituted *etz hayyim hi*. "This Torah is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it; and of them that uphold it, every one is reondered happy." *Kol Haneshamah* gives both Hebrew versions with interpretive translations (pp.440-41), because it was agreed that here the myth would not be taken literally by those likely to use the book. "Torah from Sinai" here means commitment to the Jewish people and its ancient-yet-contemporary legacy of Jewish learning and practice, and not to any particular theory of the Torah's origin.

We reached a different conclusion regarding a paragraph in the Shabbat Amidah, *Yismah Mosheh*, which deals with the same theme. There the myth becomes more literal, with Moses descending from Sinai with a crown of splendor around his head and two stone tablets in his hand. We avoided that literalism by substituting *Ashreynu*: "How happy are we, how fortunate our lot,... happy are we to be at rest upon the seventh day" (pp.306-07). *VeZot Hatorah* is sung communally, with a focus on shared celebration. *Yismah Mosheh* is from

the *Amidah*, where prayer is silent, and exploration of the meaning of the words is strongly encouraged. The need for affirmation of *klal Yisrael* took precedence in the first case, while stating a theology that we can comfortably affirm took precedence in the second. This balancing of change with continuity in making the image of Sinai our own reflects our moment in time and who we are. I have no illusion that this formulation is eternal, no certainty that it will survive even thirty years. *But it says what we felt it ought to say today*: we are heirs to Sinai who seek God's presence in Shabbat. That statement is no compromise. While avoiding the literalist claims of the Torah myth, it nevertheless speaks the resonant myth of the tradition in our own voice.

Another aspect of the Revelation myth can be found in the second blessing before the *Shema, Ahavah Rabah* (pp.272-75). It equates divine love, the giving of Torah, and the ongoing process of learning and teaching. It traditionally concludes with the words, *haboher be'amo Yisra'el be'ahavah*, "who chooses His (sic) people Israel in love." This expression of chosenness raises significant moral issues, as it does elsewhere in the liturgy. Its reference to divine love being in the choosing makes it particularly problematical, a problem intensified by the fact that these notions are here associated with references to Torah and the Sinai myth. We have followed the 1945 prayerbook in substituting the words of the evening service, *ohav amo Yisrael*, "who lovingly cares for

your people Israel." Associating love, teaching, and Torah with each other, while avoiding exclusive or triumphalist claims, is a critical moral move.

Reinterpreted myth plays a role in our liturgical life, as well as in our communal/political life, moral life, and personal, spiritual life. Eliminating myth's verbal content would make it no longer myth. Leaving it unchanged would suggest an unassimilable literalism. We live in-between—listening for the Voice murmuring amidst the myth.

## Learning Feminist Lessons

Reconstructionists have long been committed to the inclusion of women. Ensuring women's equality in the movement's leadership has long been taken as a norm, so that it is no surprise to find women on the Prayerbook Commission and among the section editors. Growing attention over the last twenty years has resulted in our similarly taking for granted the need to include the voices of women poets, liturgists, and commentators inside the prayer book, so that we can all benefit from their wisdom, insight and vision.

It has been slightly more difficult, if no less important, to emend the Hebrew text to include references to the matriarchs alongside the patriarchs. However, that is only the beginning of what we need to learn from feminism, which is a particularly rich resource for Reconstructionism, because so many of its insights extend and deepen the founding vision of Reconstructionism.

There has long been talk in Reconstructionist circles about the problems with reciting the traditional formulation of *berakhot* blessings. How can we address God as “you,” if we don’t assume a Being who is personally concerned with us? Isn’t the language of God as king in conflict with a non-personalistic approach (and isn’t it, to Americans raised on democracy, somewhat obscure, and to Canadians, pleasantly irrelevant)?

And yet these formulations have two thousand years of use behind them. Two thousand years of memory, of resonance, of *minhag* tradition. They link every Jew who recites Kid-dush or lights Shabbat candles with friends, family, the Jewish people, and previous generations. Furthermore the mythic You has been a critical form of address as a metaphor that helps to shape our spiritual lives. In short, these *berakhah* formulas are not so easy to give up.

We talk about God alternately as the unifying power in the universe, the source of transcendence or salvation, and the moral voice within. How can that imagery be made compatible with the willful king of the world in the *berakhah* formula? If we want to express our own beliefs, wouldn’t *ruah ha’olam* or *hei ha’olamim* or *Shekhinah* come closer?

Liturgical imagery mirrors political reality. One of the central insights that has emerged from feminist thought is that the image of God as King not only reinforces the notion that men are the real leaders; it also reinforces hierarchy rooted in a single powerful

patriarchal authority figure, whether that figure be the rabbi, the corporate executive, or the public official. Jewish liturgy can unintentionally reinforce the legitimacy of excessive presidential power, a message that comes through loudly, for instance, in the political use of the media in this electronic age. Images of God can also reinforce the image of the rabbi as a powerful and somewhat removed decision-maker, which does not correlate with the kind of synagogue communities we aim to create. If liturgy does not powerfully play this reinforcing role for people, it is because the language of the prayer-book is seen by most of its users as irrelevant to most of their lives. I don’t know which is worse—for the prayer-book to undermine ideals to which we are committed, or for it to be irrelevant to them.

In *Kol Haneshamah*, the supplementary readings, commentary, and Joel Rosenberg’s superb translations have effectively answered our need for a gender-neutral prayer language. The issue is more complex in Hebrew, because the Hebrew language has only two genders. The gender neutrality of “you” found in English is unavailable in Hebrew. Thus, both with nouns and pronouns, the Hebrew God-language poses no simple solutions.

The problems with the *berakhah* formula, then, involve three issues: 1.) **direct address to an impersonal God;** 2.) **the hierarchical and performative nature of the royal imagery;** and 3.) **the implied gender of God as addressee.**

Awareness of the need to face these problems is hardly new. Judith Plaskow and Marcia Falk state the problems vividly and moves us toward provisional solutions. In some congregations and havurot, experimentation with alternatives is under way. Yet clearly this is a transitional period. Most congregations have not yet begun to tackle this problem on a regular basis. Those that have moved ahead do not yet have commonly agreed upon formulations. Many people do not want change because of their concern for continuity over time and geography that has been and remains so central to the Jewish experience. They argue that while many changes are possible, this one is simply too basic and sweeping, too discontinuous.

### Encouraging New Formulas

The Prayerbook Commission lacks a crystal ball that can predict what *berakhah* formula will ultimately triumph. Yet the Commission wants to validate and encourage the effort to find new formulas. That is certainly my personal view. So how does one validate ongoing use of the inherited formula and use of alternatives at the same time? The provisional *Erev Shabbat* volume of *Kol Haneshamah* included Marcia Falk's Interpretive *Amidah* (pp.150-178) as one step in that direction. In the full *Shabbat Vehagim* volume, the traditional formula was left in place in the main Hebrew text, but the following instructions for constructing substitutes appear at regular intervals in the commentary:

Many contemporary Jews are reciting *berakhot*/blessings in ways that reflect their theological outlooks and ethical concerns. At any place where a blessing occurs in the liturgy, the following elements can be combined to create alternative formulas for *berakhot*. This can be done by selecting one phrase from each group to form the introductory clause.

#### I *Baruh atah adonay*

ברוך אתה יהוה

Blessed are you Adonay

*Bruhah at yah*

ברוכה אתה יהוה

Blessed are you Yah

*Nevareh et*

נברך את

Let us bless

#### II *eloheyntu*

אלהינו

our God

*hashehinah*

השכינה

Shehinah

*eyn hahayim*

עין החיים

Source of Life

#### III *meleh ha'olam*

מלך העולם

Sovereign of all worlds

*hay ha'olamim*

חי העולמים

Life of all the worlds

*ru'ah ha'olam*

רוח העולם

Spirit of the world

I anticipate that these formulations will be used first in constructing Torah blessings, because Torah blessings are a personal affirmation said aloud by a single individual, who can feel free to experiment. Others might then pick up these changes and begin to use them in private prayer. Eventually, prayer leaders might begin to substitute this language when chanting aloud for the congregation. The final stage of change will probably come in congregational singing and unison reading.

In a few places within the Reconstructionist movement, these changes may occur in a matter of months; in others it may take ten or twenty years, or even longer. Over time, an agreement about which new formulations are normative will emerge. That norm might consist of some combination of the elements above. It just as easily might not. In any case, the debate engendered by these issues will be important for the moral and theological development of this generation. Because of the powerful theological and political implications of these changes, I await them with great anticipation and considerable concern. I hope people remember during sometimes painful discussion and experimentation that those with whom we disagree are also acting *leshem shamayim*, for a holy purpose.

### Intellectual Honesty

The people who worked on this prayerbook are traditionalists. And they are innovators. That combina-

tion is required, if we are to have both roots and vision. The inherited liturgy has never been static. On the contrary, there have been key changes in every generation.

Some people were surprised when they looked at the first volume of *Kol Haneshamah* to see a Hebrew text labelled as traditional even though it contained wording considerably different from the language to be found in an Orthodox Ashkenazi prayerbook. The word “traditional” is by no means an effort to deceive. A prayer like the *Ge'ulah* (pp.74-77) retains the overall thrust of the original Hebrew text, yet allows for changes to reflect the Reconstructionist understanding of the evolving nature of the liturgy.

In the editing process, translation raised many issues. We agreed that it should be vivid, poetic, rhythmic, gender-neutral and reflective of the Hebrew. To do all that, it could not be a literal translation. It is therefore less than literal in an effort to be truer to the meaning of the Hebrew, as Joel Rosenberg and the Commission understood it. The translation was not meant primarily to explain the Hebrew, but rather to open the possibility of prayer in parallel to the Hebrew, for those who do not yet comprehend it.

Rendering the Hebrew into prayable English seemed to us to necessitate making the language gender-neutral and free of theologically discordant images. Thus, the phrase *melekh memit umehayeh* (literally, “king who causes death and brings to life”) is translated as “the source of life and

death" (pp.94-95). Even without the image of kingship, this version seemed to the translator and Commission to be true to the intent of the Hebrew. This kind of thinking has produced an English translation of great complexity and nuance.

It embodies some choices, however, that will not always create instant comfort. The Hebrew liturgy is filled with God-language that some Commission members could easily have done without in the English translation. But after struggling with that issue repeatedly, we reached the conclusion that we could not produce an English reflecting predicate theology, or assuming the primacy of human action in the place of active God-language, without deliberately subverting the intent of the Hebrew. When we felt it especially important to reflect Reconstructionist theology, as in the case of the Mi Sheberakh prayers invoking personal blessings, we reworked the prayers in both languages to render an English text that is genuinely parallel to the Hebrew.

### The Challenges of Return

Competent people do not long participate in activities where they are incompetent—they either leave or take steps to become competent. For those returning or turning anew to Jewish involvement, *Kol Haneshamah* lowers the hurdle of Hebrew competence by providing substantial transliteration. It lowers the hurdle of intellectual competence by providing extensive commentary explaining the history and theology of the liturgy,

and by including readings in a contemporary idiom. These tools lift people to the level that allows them to sing along and participate in the prayer community.

The response to the first volume of *Kol Haneshamah* indicates that it provides sufficient support for a large number of people to make a successful transition to participating comfortably in public worship. This is obviously good news in terms of minimally involving people in synagogue life. But it is not enough. We need far more than that minimal involvement, if communal prayer is to be a source of moral vigor and spiritual sustenance.

Some non-Orthodox congregations conduct services that presume substantial knowledge, skill and commitment for congregations whose members rarely have these prerequisites. Other congregations conduct services that resemble cantatas, which are not meant to stand up to weekly use. Still other congregations settle for an uneasy compromise between these two modes. We can and should do better. Some techniques are already in common use for helping us move beyond where most congregations now are. They include guided meditation, *kavanot*, visual imagery, a variety of uses of *nigun* and song, silence, and physical movement.

Congregational or havurah worship can help people begin using these spiritual techniques, and thereby glimpse the possibilities. The examples of these techniques in *Kol Haneshamah* barely scratch the surface of what is possible. This is so because we had neither the space nor the consen-

sus that would have allowed us to be more thorough. Nevertheless, we recognized the task as being too critical for us to ignore. I hope first that these samples will get used, and second, that using them will lead to a desire to reach beyond the prayer book to include many more such undertakings in public worship.

To accomplish this, many prayer leaders will have to broaden and deepen their experience as participants and their skills as leaders. This is a daunting challenge, and I worry about how easily it can be achieved. We cannot effectively lead others to spiritual realms we have not explored ourselves. The skill of the leader is a particularly critical matter because breaking new ground is uncomfortable even when it is exciting. Beginners depend heavily upon the leader's ability to create trust and move people naturally.

### Taking Responsibility for Spiritual Growth

Later on, spiritual growth requires a more active stance on the part of the worshiper. To progress very far, the worshiper must take conscious responsibility for shaping her/his own spiritual life. *Kol Haneshamah* encourages this by providing opportunities for the worshiper to move out of lock-step with the congregation and wander around the page, focusing on commentary, translation, a visual image, or a particular name of God, and from there into private, inner space and back again.

To be sure, an element in this is subversive of congregational unity.

How can we be united, after all, if not everyone is in the same place on the page? It is true that encouraging the worshiper's self-reliance will mean that not everyone has eyes only for the service leader, which can be disconcerting until you get used to it. But if the worshiper wanders off for a while, only to return more energized, engaged and open, the result will be a more intense and exciting worship experience for everyone. Precisely by encouraging worshipers to take private spiritual journeys do we strengthen public prayer.

As its rubrics demonstrate, *Kol Haneshamah* is also designed for private prayer. Over the long term, a major test of whether we will have achieved the prayerbook's goal of spiritual activism will be the number of people who use *Kol Haneshamah* away from the synagogue. I remember a prayerbook from my childhood that opened almost automatically to the pages for Hanukkah candle-lighting and Festival Kiddush, because those were the only times it was regularly used. The editorial design of *Kol Haneshamah* reflects broader ambitions than that, but they will be fulfilled only if congregations take seriously the responsibility for teaching private prayer and inwardness.

Part of that process should be about developing Hebrew skills and mastering music; many congregations are doing these things already. Part involves acquiring some of the spiritual techniques—including comfort with silence—that I have mentioned above. Another part is exploring peo-

ple's spiritual aspirations, and expanding their vision of what is possible. Helping Jews understand the theology of the liturgy and its periodicity also opens important vistas.

The new prayer book supports these efforts, but even its nine hundred pages cannot carry this burden without the active partnership and com-

mitment of rabbis, teachers, and prayer leaders. This work will often be difficult. But our spiritual and intellectual lives as Jews were not intended to be simple. I will be more than satisfied if, as a result of using *Kol Haneshamah*, our lives are Jewishly anchored and intellectually honest, spiritually rich, and morally vigorous. ♦

# Spirituality and the Language of Prayer

BY RICHARD HIRSH

Throughout the Jewish religious community, the current key word is “spirituality,” by which any number of things seem to be meant. For some, “spirituality” is like the weather—everyone talks about it, but no one does anything about it. For others, “spirituality” is like art—we don’t know much about it, but we know what we like. And for others, “spirituality” is akin to a judicial opinion about pornography, which suggested that “I don’t know what it is, but I know it when I see it.”

Reconstructionism, somewhat curiously, seems poised at the cutting edge of the current discussion. This is curious, owing to the fact that for any number of years, critics (and often adherents!) of Reconstructionism saw it as an essentially ethnic form of Jewish identification, in which God played a relatively minor role. “There is no God and Kaplan is his prophet” is the apocryphal reference which perhaps best typifies this attitude.

Notwithstanding this criticism, Reconstructionism as envisioned by Kaplan certainly had a great deal to say about God, even if what it had to say was not always clear. At the heart of the confusion lies the unresolved

issue of whether there is in fact “a” or “the” Reconstructionist idea of God.

## Movement or School of Thought?

The debate as to whether there is a “Reconstructionist” idea of God has a long parallel history with the debate as to whether Reconstructionism is a “movement” or a “school of thought.” From the point of view of a “movement,” Reconstructionism could fairly be understood to support a non-supernaturalist theology. God was “the Power that makes for salvation,”<sup>1</sup> or, as Kaplan later explained it, a cosmic principle by which all things are simultaneously independent and interdependent.<sup>2</sup> But God was by no means conceived in personal terms.

From the perspective of a school of thought, a framework whereby varying Jewish viewpoints could coexist, Kaplan supported theological pluralism, which of necessity incorporated various forms of “supernaturalism.” Even as he published books with titles like *Judaism Without Supernaturalism: The Only Alternative to Orthodoxy and Secularism*, and leveled increasingly sharper attacks on traditional conceptions of God, Kaplan asserted that

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there could and would be differing ideas about God within contemporary Jewry.

As Reconstructionism emerged from a school of thought into a movement, the unresolved nature of this debate was transferred from the larger community to the movement. In addition to the issues of naturalism/supernaturalism with which Kaplan struggled, the conversation now includes issues of feminist thought, gender-neutral prayer language, neo-mysticism, neo-Hasidism, and a host of other concerns which Kaplan's version of Reconstructionism did not anticipate.

It was precisely Kaplan's insight that Judaism is the natural human product of the Jewish people—rather than the supernatural revelation of God—that made Reconstructionism a **hospitable environment for theological and liturgical experimentation**. While respectful of tradition, Reconstructionism is also most able to incorporate often radical attempts at revising that tradition. As a relatively new movement, it is unburdened by decades of tradition; as a non-halakhic movement, it is unfettered by legalistic constraints; as a movement whose founder repeatedly breached religious conventions, it is willing to experiment.

### Slighting the Non-Supernatural

Reconstructionism's innovative approach to contemporary spirituality often seems, however, to slight the non-supernatural affirmations of Reconstructionism. While there may

be no "official" Reconstructionist idea of God, Reconstructionism has certainly been the main advocate for and representative of a non-personal theology. One would expect that in the current discussion of spirituality Reconstructionism would strongly represent that option.

The current Reconstructionist Friday evening prayerbook, *Kol Hane-shamah*, offers a convenient point of reference for focusing this discussion. Within the pages of this Siddur, we find restored supernaturalism ("splitting the sea in front of Moses", p.87 and note there); neo-Hasidic reappropriation of the Song of Songs (p.16 and note there); neo-mystical meditations (pp.179 ff.), and feminist liturgical reconstructions (pp.150 ff.).

Surprisingly, what is *not* found is any attempt to de-personalize the Deity in the translations—an inconsistent anachronism that the new Reconstructionist prayerbook shares with its 1945 predecessor. Notwithstanding the fractionated *Yah*/appellation, the prayers are still addressed to a "You"—a gender-neutral, non-hierarchical, immanent-mystical "You", but a "You" nonetheless.

One searches in vain for a liturgical translation that reflects Kaplanian naturalism—one that dispenses with God as "You" and speaks about what it means to be godly. To be sure, there are non-personal supplementary meditations and readings in *Kol Hane-shamah*, but such readings are not uniquely Reconstructionist; they are found in current Reform and Conservative liturgy as well.

The Reconstructionism that so often speaks of “godliness,” is not as prominent in our new liturgy as the feminist and mystical innovations. Translations affirm God as the “You” “who makes the evenings fall;” “who loves your people Israel;” “who gives and renews life.” For those seeking to correlate “the Power that makes for salvation” with the language of the prayerbook, some degree of cognitive dissonance may be assumed.

It is perhaps unfair to focus the discussion of God and spirituality solely on the Siddur, but as with the traditional prayerbook, so too with our own: what we say in prayer is probably the best anthology of our affirmations.

### **Inheriting Kaplan’s Inconsistency**

The problem of consistency derives from a paradoxical problem inherent in contemporary prayer. This problem is neatly summed up in the original preface to the 1945 Reconstructionist prayerbook, where two primary functions of prayer are outlined:

1. “The prayers of the Synagogue imply the will of the worshiper to become one with the collective being of the Jewish people and its spiritual aims... Such oneness...must mean that we are conscious of being members of the Jewish people...we recognize the unity of Israel, past, present, and future...Communal worship should be the occasion for thus immersing ourselves in the living reality of *klal Yisrael*” (p.7).

2. “People expect a Jewish prayer book to express what a Jew should believe about God, Israel, and the Torah, and about the meaning of human life and the destiny of mankind...Unless we eliminate from the traditional text statements of beliefs that are untenable, and of desires which we do not or should not cherish, we mislead the simple and alienate the sophisticated” (p.9).

A logical conclusion of the first assumption is that liturgical change is to be eschewed; how can we identify with *klal Yisrael* and participate in the unity of the Jewish people, if our tinkering with the prayers isolates or marginalizes us? (Consider, for example, the Reconstructionist Bar/Bat Mitzvah student whose Torah blessings are “different” from his/her friends — at an age when being different is often devastating!)

A logical conclusion of the second premise is that every outdated idea and every example of archaic thought ought to be eradicated in the pursuit of intellectual honesty.

The awkwardness of the 1945 Reconstructionist prayerbook reflects the indecisiveness of the editors regarding this conundrum. Certain ideas dropped out, apparently for the sake of supporting what was regarded as “true or right”—there is no “splitting of the sea before Moses.” But the essential format of the prayerbook, notably the translations, is left intact. It is a “conversation theology,” in which God is addressed as a “You” (actually, a “Thou”).

Notwithstanding Kaplan's withering attacks on supernaturalism, the 1945 prayerbook offered the uninitiated worshiper a rather traditional format—certainly not a message for those seeking a non-supernatural theology. While the new Reconstructionist prayerbook has overcome some of the intellectual rigidity of the 1945 version, for the uninitiated worshiper looking for a non-supernatural spirituality, the problem remains the same.

Reconstructionism has created a paradox: we retain the bulk of the traditional Hebrew prayers for the sake of identification and continuity, while affirming that many of us mean something quite different by the term "God" than the "conversation theology" of the English translations suggests.

### Religious Naturalism

Rabbi Alan Miller framed the theological issue in this way: "Reconstructionist Judaism is religious naturalism. God to our way of thinking is not a person who stands over against the universe he has created. The term God is rather the name we give to the interpersonal process of growth and creativity that takes place naturally among men and women striving towards authentic fulfillment. Reconstructionism, in short, preaches godliness rather than God."<sup>3</sup>

One can be a member of a Reconstructionist congregation and affirm a personal, supernatural God; after all, for decades, Reconstructionists were members of Conservative and Reform

synagogues while affirming a non-personal naturalistic God! No one suggests, or at least no one should suggest, a theological litmus test by which one attains Reconstructionist certification.

But the larger issue is: in the quest for spirituality which is at the center of much of contemporary Jewish life, has Reconstructionism missed the opportunity to send a clear message of religious naturalism? If we "preach godliness," then should we not say so, loudly and clearly, most especially in our Siddur?

It is a valuable development that the editors of the new prayerbook were able to reappropriate much of what was removed from the 1945 edition. This shows a healthy appreciation for the richness of poetry and metaphor, and a respect for the non-rational (as opposed to irrational) elements of religious experience. There is much in *Kol Haneshamah* that indeed speaks to the contemporary search for spirituality.

But there is also much that was missed, specifically the opportunity to couch in non-personal, reflective poetry the sense of the traditional Hebrew prayers. It should not be the responsibility of the simple, nor the burden of the sophisticated to process intellectually the conversation theology of the prayerbook so that "Blessed are You, Guardian, Israel's redeeming power" comes out something like, 'In moments of redemption, we become witnesses to and partners in the work of freedom.'

## Belief in God/Conceptions of God

Mordecai Kaplan's most significant contribution to contemporary discussions of spirituality lies in his crucial distinction between *belief in God* and *conceptions of God*. "The belief in God is the intuitive experience of cosmic Power upon which we depend for our existence and self-fulfillment...the particular conception of God is a cultural formulation of that belief. It varies with the particular stage of man's intellectual and social development."<sup>4</sup>

Reconstructionism, like Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform, can absorb a variety of conceptions of God: mystical, feminist, meditative, even personal. But Reconstructionism alone has been willing to endorse, validate, and promote a non-supernatural and non-personal theological vocabulary for those Jews who seek it.

For the sake of Jewish continuity, out of a respect for the sancta of tradition, and in the interests of *klal Yisrael*, I would also argue that it is imperative to retain the admittedly male-oriented formula, *barukh ata Adonay* in contrast to the experimental *nevarekh et eyn ha-hayyim* ("Let us bless the well of life") or other formulations suggested by Marcia Falk.<sup>5</sup> When we *davven* in Hebrew, we are, to use a formulation suggested by Rabbi Alan Miller, offering quotations, declaiming the words of our ancestors in order to fulfill the need to belong.<sup>6</sup>

However, what we pray in English ought to reflect, as the preface to the

1945 prayerbook suggested, what we as modern Jews can affirm. There is nothing wrong with using the word "God," perhaps the most important prism through which we refract our intuitive experience of the Divine. **But the primary function of English in our prayerbook should be to paraphrase in non-personal and non-supernatural terms the theme, insight, or feeling of the corresponding Hebrew prayer**—not to offer a translation that obscures the uniqueness of the Reconstructionist conception of God.

### Translation or Paraphrase?

Consider the following English versions of the second benediction of the *Amidah*:

1. "You are forever powerful, Mighty One abundant in your saving acts. In loyalty you sustain all the living, nurture the life of every living thing: uphold those who fall, heal the sick, free the captive, and remain faithful to all life held dormant in the earth. Who can compare to you, almighty God, who can resemble you, the source of life and death, who makes salvation grow! Faithful are you in giving life to every living thing. Blessed are You, Reviver, who gives and renews life."

2. "We pray we might encounter the Power whose gift is life, Who quickens those who have forgotten how to live on earth. We pray for love that will encompass us for no reason save that we are human. For the love

through which defeated souls may blossom into persons able to determine their own lives. We pray to stand upright, we fallen to be healed, we sufferers of the sickness of our kind; we pray that we might break the bonds that keep us from ourselves. We pray that we might walk within the garden of a life of purpose, touched by the Power of the world, touching the meaning of the earth. Praised be God whose gift is life, who quickens those who have forgotten how to live on earth”.

The first is the translation from *Kol Haneshamah*, while the second is a paraphrase from the High Holiday Mahzor *On Wings Of Awe*, edited by Rabbi Richard Levy. Levy’s version reflects the approach to English prayer that *Kol Haneshamah*, might have adopted, reflecting more clearly the function of English prayer in a Reconstructionist setting.

In making the choice to render the English in a faithful (and elegant) translation, the editors of *Kol Haneshamah* provided valuable access to the original Hebrew, but missed an opportunity to articulate the distinctiveness of Reconstructionist theology.

In its attempt to be “liturgically correct.” *Kol Haneshamah* incorporated a variety of spiritual approaches, in a hierarchy that seems to have placed non-sexist language, feminist interpretations, and neo-Hasidic/mystical interpretations in descending order of priority. While all of these reflect

important concerns—and *Kol Haneshamah* is to be applauded for the courage to incorporate them—such innovations could have had a still greater impact had they been couched in naturalistic language that reflects our uniqueness.

The contemporary quest for spirituality reflects a deep need for meaning and value. A vocabulary that can offer hope, inspiration, and comfort to modern Jews is indispensable in responding to that need. Perhaps not everyone in this “generation of seekers” is in need of a non-supernatural and non-personal approach to God; but surely many are. If we in the Reconstructionist movement do not provide the vocabulary for those Jews, no one else will. ♦

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1. See Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1962), ch. 2.

2. Kaplan called this principle by various names, among them, “reciprocity,” “polarity,” “organicity;” see *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood: Judaism’s Contribution to World Peace* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 50, 59, 71; and Mordecai M. Kaplan and Arthur A. Cohen, *If Not Now, When? Toward a Reconstitution of the Jewish People* (New York: Schocken, 1973), 38.

3. *The Reconstructionist*, 43 (Sept. 1977), 20.

4. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 182.

5. “New Blessings: Toward a Feminist-Jewish Reconstruction of Prayer,” *The Reconstructionist* 53 (Dec., 1987), 10-15, 22; see also the essay by Falk in the current volume.

6. Alan Miller, *The God of Daniel S.: In Search of the American Jew* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 166-67.

# The Sovereignty of God: Fragments from Kaplan's Notes

BY MEL SCULT

Those unacquainted with Kaplan's work hold that he gave up belief in God rather easily at a young age. The truth is that Kaplan never ceased to believe in God and expended an enormous amount of time and energy throughout his life trying to understand the divine and to translate traditional concepts into contemporary forms. In the selection below, from about 1928, we see his reinterpretation of the concept of God's sovereignty. This concept that appears so antiquated in its connection with the institution of monarchy is transformed by Kaplan into a vibrant contemporary value.

## Kaplan's Text

"The acceptance of the sovereignty of God is the acceptance of the distinction between the sacred and the profane as no less real than that between the beautiful and the ugly. Such acceptance expresses itself in the attitude of reverence.

"With the growth of civilization, mankind tends to lose the sense of wonder and mystery. Among primitive peoples, life possesses a freshness which renders every striking event a divine manifestation, every new thought a divine revelation. Does emergence from the primitive conditions of life and the growth of control over the environment make it inevitable for man to become sophisticated and blase so that he can see nothing new, nothing significant, nothing divine under the sun? It is this lack of zest which has secularized our lives, which has taken God out of our days. In asserting the sovereignty of God, we refuse to accept such secularism as final. We are determined to recover the attitude of reverence, to recognize that there are things in life which we must approach in a spirit of piety.

"There are situations and occasions that call to us to realize that we are in the presence of the divine; that speak

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to us, if we can only hear, in the same way as the voice that spoke to Moses out of the thornbush: "Draw not nigh hither; the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." The divine shows itself in the sacredness with which we invest the turning points in a person's life; in the holiness in which we hold the marriage bond; in the sense of mystery which we associate with birth and death; in the reverence for all human relationships and institutions that make for the development of the higher nature in man....

"To affirm the sovereignty of God means to acknowledge a higher law and authority than one's own arbitrary will. The acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven culminates in the acceptance of the yoke of the law. That implies the belief that God communicates His will to man and that man must render obedience to that will.

"This affirmation is lived up to when we obey the moral law not because we are afraid of the penalty that might be visited upon us in case we transgress it, but because we regard it as enabling us to bring to fruition the highest and best of which we are capable. The moral law must, accordingly, mean to us something far more significant and inherent in the very nature of the universe than it could ever be if it were merely social convention or habit. The moral law, to be sure, expresses itself in changing formulations, in varying codes, precepts and standards of right and wrong. That, however, does not alter the fact that the moral law as such is inherent

in the nature of the universe. Our formulations of it are progressive discoveries of its true character. It is for us to obey the latest formulation if we are to grow to greater intelligence and wellbeing.

"This conception of the moral law as inherent in the very nature of reality...entitles the moral law to be called in all literalness the will of God. As man keeps on discovering the will of God in the physical laws that operate in earth, sea and sky, so he keeps on learning the will of God in the life of society. In the past, it was generally accepted that God revealed his will for all times in the records handed down from the past. Nowadays, we maintain that the revelation of God's will is taking place in the growth of our spiritual vision and the widening of our sympathies. The previous formulations of it are to be viewed as a sanction and inspiration of subsequent discoveries. Judaism would have us cultivate the frame of mind which finds expression in the urge to discover the most appropriate application of the universal law of righteousness.

"Duty is to human society what the law of gravitation is to the physical order. The manifold social institutions are agencies to set duty in operation. The cosmic conception of the moral law enables us to view it as absolute, by which we mean that it possesses a character which makes it greater than any individual or community.

"That cosmic conception of the moral law points to the conscience as a medium for experiencing the reality of

God. If God is to be to us more than the name of a Being, in whose existence we are to believe on the evidence of tradition, if God is to be in some way an object of personal experience, surely the conscience which urges us to do our duty and which rebukes us for the neglect or violation of duty, should afford us the means of such experience. The conscience can function in that capacity only when duty has for us the deep cosmic significance which extends it beyond the domain of chance human arrangements.” ♦

# The Unity of Adonay/Elohim

BY HAROLD M. SCHULWEIS

**B***arukh ata Adonay Eloheynu melekh ha'olam.* Blessed art Thou Lord our God king of the Universe. Who is the Thou addressed? The Thou is modified by two names of divinity that are distinct but inseparable. *Adonay and Elohim*, two aspects of the same divinity.

*Shema Yisrael.* hear Israel, *Adonay Elohim* is One.

In what sense One? For many, the two names of God rub against each other. For Judah Halevi in the eleventh century, as for Blaise Pascal in the seventeenth, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (*Adonay*) is not the God of Aristotle (*Elohim*). *Elohim* governs and manages the universe without any change in his nature, without feelings of sympathy with one or anger against another. *Elohim* guides the world neutrally and according to the axiom of the prophet Zephaniah, "will do no good, neither will he do evil" (1:12).<sup>1</sup>

*Elohim* is the ground of creation and his name alone is heard throughout the first chapter of Genesis. *Elohim* creates all: the lion and the lamb, the wolf and the sheep, the bacteria and the infant. When *Elohim* saw

everything that he had created, he called it "very good," and the sages comment that this goodness refers to death as well as to life, to the evil desire as well as to the good desire, to the dispensation of suffering and the dispensation of happiness, to Gehenna and Paradise, to the dispensation of reward, to the kingdom of earth and the kingdom of heaven."<sup>2</sup>

*Elohim* is the metaphysical ground of all being, beyond the normal meaning of good and evil as humans understand it. *Elohim* needs no friendship with humankind and enters no covenant with human beings. *Elohim* is independent of his creation. As understood by Halevi, *Elohim* "neither benefits nor injures nor knows anything of our prayers or offerings, our obedience or disobedience."<sup>3</sup> *Elohim* is wholly transcendent.

*Elohim* is the reality principle. One cannot pray responsibly without keeping *Elohim* in mind. *Elohim* remembered keeps our prayers sober, sane, anchored in reality. *Elohim* instructs us that we cannot pray for matters beyond logical possibility or contrary to natural laws. We cannot pray that time should be reversed, or

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that the dead lying before us be resurrected, or that the amputated grow limbs.

### Full-throated Prayer

We cannot pray without *Elohim*. Yet we cannot pray with *Elohim* alone. We do not pray *Barukh ata Elohim*. Full-throated prayer includes *Adonay*, the power that is discovered in the potentiality of reality. *Adonay* is the power that stretches reality to its limits and transforms it. *Adonay* is the ideal-ity principle. *Adonay* first enters biblical recognition with the elevation of the human being, who is charged with cultivating the earth (Gen. 2:5-8).

Before there were humans, there was *Elohim*. After humans cease, *Elohim* will be. But *Adonay* is *Adonay* only with man and woman. Human beings call for *Adonay* and *Adonay* calls for human beings. *Adonay* is correlated with humanity, calling upon human beings to be co-creators and co-sanctifiers with *Adonay*.

One cannot pray to *Adonay* without calling upon the petitioner himself or herself. One cannot pray to *Adonay* for peace with folded arms, locked legs and muted voice. One cannot pray to *Adonay* for health without responsibility toward the body and the spirit of the self who prays.

In crises beyond human control, religious wisdom turns to *Elohim* and

counsels acceptance. In crises within human control, religion calls to *Adonay* and calls for transformation.

*Elohim* and *Adonay* are one. Without *Elohim*, prayer is fantasy. Without *Adonay*, prayer is submission to fate. So the first ten verses introducing the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22) refer exclusively to *Elohim*. It is the way of the pagan world to sacrifice the child. It is only, however, with the introduction of the angel of conscience, malakh *Adonay*, that the knife is restrained. Abraham experiences the internal change from *Elohim* to *Adonay*, from passive acceptance to active transformation. And Abraham called the name of the place in which this transformation took place, *Adonay-Yireh*, *Adonay* sees.

The God of Abraham and the God of the philosophers are one. As the heart and mind are one. The God of Aristotle and the God of Judah Halevi are not opposing forces; they are sacred complements of divinity toward whose unity we strive. On that day the Lord God shall be One and God's name One. ♦

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1. Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari: An Argument for the Faith of Israel*, trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld (New York: Schocken, 1964), 198-223; see 218 for the quote from Zephaniah.

2. I have here summarized a number of comments from *Bereyshit Rabah*: 9.

3. Halevi, 200.

# Beyond Lordship: Personalizing Adonay

BY MARCIA PRAGER

If God's essence is indeed THE ESSENCE beyond all essences, the Being that is the ever-becomingness of Existence itself, what name that humans could possibly utter would describe such a power? What utterance produced in and by the world of matter could name that which transcends all physicality?

The letters *yud, heb, vav, heb*, are the name of Being itself. Jewish tradition reflects our awareness that naming is the process whereby the essence of a thing is called into creation. This is why Creation itself is described in Torah as a "calling out." God *speaks* creation into being, *ex-pressing* God's self, literally "pressing out" energy from the CENTER OF BEING itself, allowing that energy to become manifest in the realm of physicality.

Jewish wisdom has taught us an unpronounceable Name that transcends and subsumes all names, a Name that encompasses Eternity in an unpronounceable breath, to remind us that the Eternal Power that is the Source of All is beyond our appropriation. Thus, when Jews see the Divine Name in print, we usually

substitute another word, one of the various "code" names through which we direct our *kavannah/intention* to access the One.

When Jews read Torah, or say a *berakhah*, the God-name most commonly used is *Adonay*. It is one of the most poorly translated words in Jewish God-language, usually, as "Lord." On the most pedestrian level, *adon* means mister, or master, a source of much confusion and theological distress. When we hear "master," our conditioned impulse is to think of master/slave, master/servant, ruler, even oppressor, connotations that "Lord" reinforces. If God is my master, I am God's servant; if God is my Lord, I am God's vassal.

While not useless spiritual concepts, in a contemporary milieu informed both by a feminist critique and a striving towards increasingly egalitarian social ideals, *Adonay* as "Lord and Master" fails on both counts. Not only does using it seem a capitulation to hierarchy, but the name also relentlessly reminds us that the divine hierarchy of power is male-dominated. Precisely because of our

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contemporary discomfiture with these “Lord and Master” connotations, I have begun to explore what Jewish spiritual wisdom has taught us of this unique opportunity to experience God.

## Naming God: Entering into Relationship

I would like to propose taking the discussion of Adonay to another place. Jewish tradition teaches us that each name we have for the God-that-is-Beyond-Name is a point of access into a different relationship with the One. Each name is a gateway into a chamber wherein lies an opportunity. As Yosef Gikatilia, the 13th century Kabbalist, wrote:

“...There are so many gates in the House of the *Melekh*/the One Source. Gates within gates!... They all are contained within the four-letter Name that is *YHVH* of Blessing. But each has a [unique Name and] function. Like a vast treasure-house with numerous chambers and a unique treasure within each one.<sup>1</sup>

The image of the One manifesting within a many chambered treasure-palace recurs throughout Jewish mystical/spiritual literature, offering us enriching metaphors for our own treasury of experiences of God.

The image of a magnificent multifaceted prismatic crystal is valuable as another metaphor to convey this sense of manifold opportunities. Each facet of a crystal offers both a window into the crystal and a refracting lens for the light that shines through it. I can only

peer within the crystal through one face at a time. As the crystal turns, each facet sends a different colored light towards me. Were I to freeze my position and that of the crystal, I might imagine that the one face I see is the whole. My relationship with the whole would be *pasul*, deficient.<sup>2</sup> Each “facet of the crystal” is an integral part of the whole. Each offers a unique opportunity to experience and relate to a “face.” Each is a window into something greater than itself, and each also sends a ray of the crystal’s inner light out towards us.

Our collective and also personal experience of the Power we call God is not dissimilar. As individuals, we move in our lives and make myriads of emotional shifts, and, as the Jewish people, we move in our historical journey, and similarly make the myriads of emotional shifts that journey calls out of us. As we move, the “crystal” moves with us. Different faces of the One turn to face us, as we turn different faces of our selves to face the One. Each face is at once a response to us and an opportunity to enter into a unique “chamber,” a unique relationship.

## The Lessons of Mastery

To enter the “chamber” of *Adonay*, I have found it helpful to begin most simply with *adon*, in its common translation as “master.” This translation invites us to look more deeply at the experience of mastery. Here, if we move beyond simple feudal master-servant motifs, we encounter other meanings of mastery: the master

craftsman, the mastery of an art or skill. Each of us has perhaps something that we love so much, something in which we have invested so much of ourselves, that we know ourselves to be a true artist, a true master of that craft.

Consider the relationship between the master carpenter and the wood. The master carpenter, by the feel and the smell of the wood, knows the difference between teak and oak, pine and maple, knows which way to carve with the grain, how to move the plane. Imagine yourself as the carpenter. All your senses are alive to the wood! Your nostrils know the tang of each different scent of sawdust and resin. You know the firm heartwood by feel, the hew of rough timbers and the silken strokes of hand-rubbed oils that massage smooth surfaces to silky sheen. This is a deep dimension of mastery. The experience of this relationship is more like that of lover and beloved than of lord and vassal. The wood sculptor who takes the chisel to the block so loves the wood that it becomes an extension of his or her own being. The wood "responds" to the hands of the sculptor as if to a caress, and becomes art.

Consider a master potter, who takes an inert lump of clay and works with it until the clay begins to take shape. On the wheel, the clay leaps and rises into the potter's hands. Neither the clay nor the potter is complete without the other. Without the clay, the potter is no potter, and, without the potter, the clay remains a lifeless lump. Each finds fulfillment in

the dance that calls them both into being. The dance in which they both come to an aliveness with each other is a dance of love.

In the Jewish high holiday liturgy, both in *ki hineh kahomer* and *ki anu amekha*, this quality of mutual aliveness is present. When we are clay, Yours are the potter's hands; when we become fine silver, we are refined in Your Presence. At times, we are like the molten glass receiving the blower's breath. When the face we turn to You is a "need for guidance," You turn towards us the quality of the shepherd. When we need consolation, You become the consoler; when we need strength, You become the empowerer. Each time our own needs turn, the right facet comes and faces us. As the clay rises to the potter's hands, we rise into Your hands.

And so, one way to work with the experience of *adon* is to take it out of the realm of master-over, out of our master/slave consciousness, and to view our *relationship* with God as the great artistic project of Creation. One of our names for God is *Yotzer*, the One creating, like an artisan, from that which already exists. And so, we call God the great *Yotzer*, the artisan, and *we* become part of the artistic project.

One of the most moving films I have ever seen was *From Mao to Mozart*. This documentary follows the great violinist Isaac Stern's visit to China after the defeat of the Cultural Revolution. In a poignant moment, Stern is listening to a young girl execute a technically flawless rendition of

a Mozart piece. When she finishes, with warmth and generosity he takes her violin and plays the piece again. The room is hushed as, in his hands, the violin is transformed. His notes are identical to hers, but suddenly they have become alive: magical, resonant with the deepest feeling. The melodies leap, soar, sing, cry. When he is finished the astonished audience is in awe. Turning to the young girl he says: "You see, *you* don't play the violin, *it* plays you. No, more than that. You and the violin become one instrument, and something else plays through both of you."

This moment offered me a deep teaching about the nature of the relationship that we are calling *adon*. I feel myself being the violin. What if the violin was gifted with consciousness? What might I experience as violin in Isaac Stern's hands—to feel those fingers and that heart open to me so that we might become one in a cascade of music? Through that embrace I open and become one not only with the *adon*, but with the Power that comes through that aperture to play us both.

Our relationship to our *adon* is one of maximal receptivity. To experience God in the aspect of *adon* is to open ourselves to our destiny as co-creators, to heighten our receptivity to what God is calling on us to do and to become.

## Membrane for the Divine Flow

If the name *Adonay* is understood as deriving from *adon* with these connotations, then it is perhaps not

entirely surprising that Jewish tradition associates the God-name *Adonay* with the *feminine* aspect of God! Throughout Jewish mystical and Hasidic literature, the name *Adonay* is understood as being the membrane through which the Divine flow enters the world, and through which the seeker who would enter the Divine realm must pass. This is the gateway where the spiritual and physical realms touch—the semi-porous membrane through which the ceaseless flow of God-energy is filtered into the realm of physicality. Here the *Shefa*, the flow of Divinity towards the world, is held, incubated, nurtured and completed. Here all the diverse energies of Divinity are unified and perfected before being birthed into the world. This feminine aspect of God serves as a vessel open to receive the many streams from above, unifying, perfecting and transforming them so that God-ness can pour forth to irrigate the world.

As we, the God-conscious creatures of the physical world, turn our souls to drink from our Source, we find that Source flowing ever more vigorously towards us. God-ness and we meet at this Well named *Adonay*. Here our soul and the One Soul touch. We have learned to access this well by many names. She is *Shekhinah*, "The power that dwells within and among us"; She is *Malkhut*, "Kingdom"; she is the Well, the Gate, the Moon, the sacred city Jerusalem, King David, Rachel and Leah, the Bride, *Shabbat*, and the name *Adonay*.<sup>3</sup> She is the gate of which the *Zohar* speaks, saying: "One

who enters must enter through this gate.”<sup>4</sup>

The Chernobler Rebbe, in a wonderful *derash* on the obscure word *adanim* (usually translated ball-joints or sockets), used in the description of the crafting of the *mishkan* (Exod. 36:26), gives us another glimpse into how *Adonay* can be understood as the connecting link with the Divine Flow. A ball-joint is a mechanism for flexible connection, like many joints in the body. Just as the flexible *adanim*, the ball-joints, held the upper and lower sections of the tabernacle together, so too *Adonay*, the Divine within-ness, holds the lower and higher worlds together.<sup>5</sup>

Jewish tradition offers us the opportunity to take this exploration yet further. In Hebrew, the word *adan* also means *threshold*, the partition at an entrance. We likewise speak of a threshold when we refer to the outer limit of capacity for sensation. Beyond the threshold we cannot go. And so, when we call out to God as *Adonay*, we can experience ourselves as being ushered to the doorway, the threshold of our capacity for intimacy with the Divine Presence. When we understand *Adonay* as correlative with *adan*, threshold, we comprehend that this name moves us spiritually to the threshold of that which we have already experienced of Divinity.

In order to take the next step, the challenge for us is to push the limits of that threshold, to expand our capacities for intimate relationship, to open ourselves more fully to entering God’s world and bringing God-ness into our

world. Each time we do our deepest spiritual stretching; each time we go to the most frightened places in our souls—those places where we fear that if God or anyone saw us, we could certainly not be loved; each time we let love into those soul-places that have yet to be healed or into aspects of self that have yet to be uncovered, we are calling out to God as *Adonay*, my threshold. ♦

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1. *Sha’arei Orah* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1970), 53-55; *Sha’ar Rishon*—The Tenth Sefirah. All the translations in this essay are my own.

2 This is how I understand the Torah’s urgent, repetitive injunction against making or serving a *pesel* (usually translated “idol”). The commandment is not so much about stone statues, as it is a call to us not to serve that which is deficient, less than the whole: not to isolate or fabricate something less than the Whole and elevate it to the position of the Whole.

3. Reb Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl writes: “The *kavod*/Glory/Presence of the Creator fills the earth. No place is empty! Yet the Presence takes the form of garments: God is clothed by all physical things. This aspect of Divinity is called *Shekhinah* (“the Presence-that-dwells-within”), since it dwells within everything. It is called *Adonay*” (*Me’or Eynayim [Light of the Eyes]*, Brooklyn: Kiryat Sefer, 1947, *Lekh Lekha*, 20). In *Hanhagot Yesharim/[Upright Practices]*, writing about a person emerging pure from the *miqveh* (ritual bath), he writes: “The human being represents the category of *Adonay*, also called *Shekhinah*, for she dwells within the lower realms.” See *Hanhagot Tzadiqim* (Jerusalem: Rottenberg, 1988), I, 512.

4. *Zohar* 1:7b. Gikatilia adds: “From the name *YHVH* all the channels flow and are drawn to *Adonay*...the great sustainer of all Creation. All who wish to experience *devekut*/cleaving to the name *YHVH*, ever blessed, go forth and enter through the

mouth (of this gate). *Adonay* is the way”  
(*Sha’arei Orah: Sha’ar Rishon*, 57).

5. “The whole world is a garbing of God, and it is God that is within each garment. This aspect of divinity is called *Adonay*, like the *adanim* which held the *mishkan* together. This is God-ness as it filters down into the physical realm so that we can reunite it with its Source. In every act of worship, whether study, prayer, eating or drinking, we can bring about this union” (*Me’or Eynayyim: Bereyshit*, 10).

# Beyond the Personal God

BY DANIEL C. MATT

God is a name we give to the oneness of it all.

The act of naming is quintessentially human. Adam named all the animals, including himself. The rabbis imagine God passing all the animals in front of Adam, asking him, "What is this one called? And this one?" Adam responds, "Ox, camel, donkey, horse." Then the first human being provides his own name, and finally he provides God with a name: *YHVH*!

God is the oneness of the cosmos, the interconnectedness of all there is. But "God" is a name that we attach to this oneness. "God" is the all-inclusive name, the name, *Ha-shem*.

Our act of naming, so bold and powerful, betrays our limitations. By naming things, we control them—or we try to. With our resounding names we can call other people, and call upon them: commanding, cajoling, imploring them. By defining things, we classify them, bestowing or imposing order on the welter that surrounds us. But as we define things, we confine them and confine our understanding. The very meaningfulness of

our names constricts the reality we are naming.

The names that Adam, Eve and their descendants have assigned to things are useful and necessary but misleading. We cannot function in this world without names and labels, yet we cannot perceive all that is there, if we remain entranced by names. My wife's name, Ana, is deeply meaningful to me because it reminds me of what I feel for her, which is beyond words. If I want to see her, I can speak her name: "Ana, could you come here for a minute?" But the moment she comes into the room, her name dissolves in her presence.

I am looking out the window at a tree. My eye follows a branch and focuses on a leaf. "Leaf." The name is mentally satisfying. I have found the appropriate label; I know what I am seeing. But the appropriateness of the name lulls me into thinking that there really is a separate object there called a leaf, as if the leaf were not part of a continuum: blade-veins-stem-stipule-twig-branch-limb-bough-trunk-root. So the name "leaf" is misleading. Maybe I should just stick with "tree?"

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But is there really a separate, self-contained thing I can call by that name? Down below, the roots absorb water and minerals from the soil. Up above, the chlorophyll in the leaves traps and stores the energy of sunlight. The leaf is not separate from the tree; the tree is not separate from the earth and the atmosphere. Nothing is entirely separate from anything else.

We need names to navigate through life, but those very names obscure the flowing continuum. Behind each handy name is a teeming reality that resists our neat definitions. And if this is true of the names we assign to the ten thousand and more things of this world, how much more so with our names for God, the oneness of it all.

## Naming the Unnameable

How to name the unnameable? The Kabbalah offers a number of possibilities. One is *Eyn Sof*, the boundless—literally, “there is no end.” *Eyn Sof* is the Infinite, the God beyond God. The originality and radical nature of this name are attested by an anonymous kabbalist who admits that *Eyn Sof* is not even hinted at in the Bible or in the Talmud.<sup>2</sup>

The negation *eyn* (“there is no”) accords with the insight of Maimonides that it is more accurate to say what God is *not* than what God *is*. To say that God is powerful makes Him sound like some kind of muscleman. “God is wise” sounds too much like the description of a human sage. Better to say that God is neither weak nor stupid. Even the bland statement

“God exists” is misleading, because divine existence is unlike anything we conceive. God exists but not through existence.<sup>3</sup> The best theology is negative theology:

Know that the description of God by means of negations is the correct description, a description that is not affected by an indulgence in facile language. Negative attributes conduct the mind toward the utmost reach that one may attain in the apprehension of God... You come nearer to the apprehension of God with every increase in negations.<sup>4</sup>

The kabbalists adopt Maimonides’ negative style of theology and take it to an extreme. Among their new names for God, *Eyn Sof* is the most famous but not the most radical. Having carved away all that is false, they discover a paradox of a name: *ayin*, Nothingness. We encounter this bizarre term among Christian mystics as well: John Scotus Erigena calls God *nihil*, Meister Eckhart, *nichts*, St. John of the Cross, *nada*.

What does it mean to call God *Nothingness*? It does not mean that God does not exist. In the words of a fourteenth-century kabbalist, David ben Abraham Halavan,

Nothingness (*ayin*) is more existent than all the being of the world. But since it is simple, and all simple things are complex compared with its simplicity, in comparison it is called *ayin*.

David ben Avraham’s mystical Christian contemporaries concur. The

Byzantine theologian Gregory Palamas writes, "He is not being, if that which is not God is being." Eckhart says, "God's *nichts* fills the entire world; His something though is nowhere."<sup>5</sup>

*Ayin* is a name for the nameless. It conveys the idea that God is no thing, neither this nor that. Rather, as *ayin*, God animates all things and cannot be contained by them. The paradox is that *ayin* embraces "everything" and "nothing." This nothingness is oneness, undifferentiated oneness, overwhelming the distinctions between things. God is the oneness that is no particular thing, no thingness, Nothingness with a capital N.

*Ayin* is not empty or barren; it is fertile and overflowing, engendering the myriad forms of life. According to Jewish, Christian and Islamic medieval philosophy, the world was created "out of nothing" (*yesh me'ayin, ex nihilo, min la shai*). The mystics turn this formula on its head, reinterpreting it to mean that the universe emanated out of divine nothingness.

Nothingness is a shocking name for God; yet it accords with one of the most basic commands of the Torah: the prohibition against idolatry. "You shall not have any other gods before Me." These days, it is rare to find people bowing down to graven images, but we constantly constrict God within mental images, thinking that He or She has a particular form. God is worshiped as Mother or Father, as Provider, Judge, Ruler. These metaphors reassure us and inspire us to act ethically. But

when the metaphor hardens into a fixed image, we lose more than we have gained. Our awareness of God becomes limited to the particular image we focus on. The infinite nature of God is reduced, desecrated. In the words of a twelfth-century kabbalist from Barcelona, whoever thinks that God has an image is fashioning idols and bowing down to them.<sup>6</sup> Idolatry is as much a mental as a physical act.

*Ayin* is an antidote to idolatry. It forces us to surrender our comfortable, confining images; it melts them down. This "*Nichts* of the Jews," writes the seventeenth-century poet Henry Vaughan, exposes "the naked divinity without a cover."<sup>7</sup> But how can we think or speak of God without images and conceptions? We can't. Even *ayin* is a conception. The images it evokes may be vast—a limitless ocean, the expanse of outer space—but they are images nonetheless. The value of nothingness is that it dissolves all images and conceptions, including itself.

Names and images of God enable us to approach the divine, but they can't quite get us there. They keep us at a safe distance. The words and pictures indicate the reality but cannot convey it. To experience the divine, we need to leave names and images aside. We must renounce the idolatry of worshiping the image, of worshiping the name. On the threshold, we are challenged to let go of words, to attune ourselves to *qol demamah daqah*, "the sound of sheer silence" (I Kings 19:12).

## Relating to God's Names

In the Bible God is almost a person, and He is called by personal names: *Shaddai*, *Elohim*, *YHVH*. *YHVH* is such a personal God that He is in love with Israel and jealous of other gods who might lure His beloved away. The mystical names *Eyn Sof* and *ayin*, the Infinite and Nothingness, are impersonal, and this impersonality has certain implications. If I relate to God as *YHVH*, it is hard not to imagine a specific being with definite characteristics. I may believe that *YHVH* is everywhere, but it is equally possible to think that *YHVH* is somehow separate from everything. This accords with the biblical notion that God is separate from nature and does not overlap the world. God brought the world into being; God did not become the world. In the words of Saint Augustine, the works of creation "were made from nothing by Thee, not of Thee."<sup>8</sup> I have a covenantal relationship with *YHVH*, and essential to this relationship is the fact that our identities are separate. Though I am created in the image of God, we relate to each other as other.

The impersonal names *Eyn Sof* and *ayin* suggest a different kind of relationship. Or, one might say, they undermine the very notion of relationship. How can I relate to the boundless? The boundless includes me. Neither I nor anything else in the cosmos is separate from the Infinite. Everyone and everything is part of It.

There is a deep need for a personal God, for a personal relationship to God. The Jewish mystics themselves felt and acknowledged this need.

This, in fact, is one of the key differences between them and the Jewish philosophers, for many of whom God remains abstract. The mystics say very little about *Eyn Sof*, which is how it should be in speaking of the infinite. But they go on and on about the ten sefirot, the various aspects and attributes of God, which constitute a list of divine names. There is not much to say about the first *sefirah*: it is *ayin*, undifferentiated oneness, roughly the same as infinity. It is usually referred to as *Keter*, "Crown."

The other nine *sefirot* emanate out of this pool of infinite nothingness. These various divine qualities include Wisdom, Understanding, Grace, Rigor, Beauty, and several more. The sefirotic God is described far more graphically and anthropomorphically than the God of the Bible. Here we find what appears to be an androgynous divine body, complete with arms, legs, and sexual organs. The *sefirot* interact constantly with each other and with the world. The tenth *sefirah*, in particular, *Shekhinah*, is intimately involved with humanity. As the feminine divine "presence," She accompanies Israel in exile, communes with righteous individuals, and mollifies the occasional outbursts of her masculine partner, the Holy One, blessed be He. The goal of religion, according to the Kabbalah, is to unite this divine couple, thereby assuring a flow of blessing and emanation to the world.

*Shekhinah* is perhaps the most intriguing of all the *sefirot*. She is not only a partner of masculine divinity;

she represents a partial corrective to patriarchal religion. The Goddess may have been expunged from the official religion of biblical and rabbinic Judaism, but She reemerges as *Shekhinah* in medieval Kabbalah. This new flowering is a testament to the Goddess's enduring hold on the religious consciousness and an example of "the revenge of myth."<sup>9</sup> Rendered kosher by the Kabbalah, *Shekhinah* became immensely popular.

The kabbalists were not, however, proto-feminists. *Shekhinah* is relegated to the last rung of the sefirotic ladder; she is subservient to the Holy One, blessed be He. *Shekhinah* is generally passive and receptive. She transmits the flow of divine emanation but is said to have "nothing at all of her own." The image of *Shekhinah* in the Kabbalah is a masculine product, fashioned by men for men. Still, it is significant that She plays such a prominent role in the divine economy. She is clearly one of the main characters in the *Zohar*, which devotes more space to her than to any other *sefirah*. She fascinated the *Zohar's* male author, who realized something radically obvious: that God is not adequately described in masculine terms.

But does God really have gender and personality? While *Shekhinah* and the other *sefirot* embody the male and female personality of God, *Eyn Sof* transcends and denies it. The *sefirot* fulfill the human need for a personal God and a personal relationship with Him and Her, while in the background lurks the Boundless. The *sefirot* constitute a set of divine arche-

types, in whose ideal image we are created. But is God really like that? Ultimately, according to the *Zohar*, the mystic discovers that the *sefirot* have no independent existence apart from *Eyn Sof*: "When one contemplates..., there is nothing but the High Spark."<sup>10</sup> Are the *sefirot* simply a human projection? As the *Zohar* puts it, they appear to exist only *mi-sitra di-lan*, "from our perspective."<sup>11</sup>

What is this deep need for a personal God — a God we can name? Part of the answer has to do with the painful awareness of our own mortality. We yearn for the comfort of a cosmic parent who will always be there for us. Perhaps She will let us live a little longer. At least, we can look forward to resting eternally in His bosom. Even if the sun will eventually burn out, in about five billion years, there must be something that endures forever, some ultimate one on whom we can rely.

It's comforting to feel that someone out there is watching over us, caring for us, that we have a Mother or Father in Heaven. But this belief is continually contradicted by the suffering that tinges our lives. Those who believe in a personal God who knows and cares have to rationalize earthquakes and fire and the death of children—or else insulate themselves from whatever facts threaten to deface their fragile portrait of God.

We experience many things that mock the notion of a personal God; yet we insist on maintaining our personal relationship to Her or Him. This stubbornness is due not only to

our awareness of mortality, or our need to be cared about. There is a more fundamental connection between the self and a personal God. The two notions—or illusions—are intertwined.

## Reimagining the Self and Reimagining God

What is the self? It's hard to pin down. Let's begin with the observation that we have not always had one. An infant makes no clear distinction between subject and object, between itself and the external world. In its primal state of being there is no defined center of self. The "self" seems to pass into objects, and objects into it. These objects are not permanent, but only perceptual pictures that appear, dissolve, and reappear.<sup>12</sup> The infant lives a symbiotic relation with its mother's body that blurs any sharp boundary between the two.

Whether we remember it or not, there was a time in each of our lives—just a few decades ago—when we didn't yet know how to differentiate between internal and external, between self and other. Separateness was not yet a category for us. Then one day, we spoke the magic word "I," and everything changed. The primal meaning of "I" is "not you." As Buber wrote, "Man becomes an I through a You... The I-consciousness...for a long time...appears only woven into the relation to a You, discernible as that which reaches for but is not a You."<sup>13</sup>

As we grow, we each retrace the journey of the human species; ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. The Tal-

mud relates that Adam originally extended "from one end of the universe to the other."<sup>14</sup> The first human being had no clear-cut sense of a separate self. His consciousness was unbounded; he was one with the cosmos. Only after eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil—after learning to make distinctions—was he reduced to mortal, puny size. His cosmic consciousness contracted, and he became aware of his limited self.

We could not survive or function in the world without a separate sense of self, without an ego. If we didn't recognize the boundary between our body and the outside world, we would soon drown or be burned, be bitten by a snake, eaten by a lion, or run over by a car. Humans, of course, are not unique in this regard. No living thing can survive unless it distinguishes between self and other.

Our experience of consciousness is subjective; yet it is a physical property, a biological feature, of the brain. Conscious experience is caused by electrochemical interactions between billions of neurons. Every tenth of a second, a stream of oscillating networks of neurons forms and falls away. The cooperative states among these networks gives rise to consciousness.<sup>15</sup> While it appears to be continuous, in fact, consciousness is discontinuous and gappy. There is no permanent, abiding, essential self. We have learned to imagine that at our core there is a separate, conscious entity, but this is a fiction, a wondrous and necessary fiction, a constructed feature of our

mental landscape. It is not that we are less than a self; we are more. We are part of the oneness.

## The Story of the Self

Over our lifetime, in collaboration with our family and friends, we have woven a story about ourselves—a story that defines who we are. The ego cannot be understood or expressed except in relation to an audience, and this audience's responses—real or imagined—continually shape the way in which we define ourselves, the story we tell. We do not consciously and deliberately figure out what narratives to tell and how to tell them. For the most part, we don't spin our tales; they spin us. Our narrative selfhood is their product, not their source.

These streams of narrative issue forth as if from a single source. To those around us, it seems that a unified agent has authored the story, that there is a center of narrative gravity. This apparent center, this apparent self, is an enormously helpful simplification, but it is an abstraction, not a thing in the brain. Though fictional, it is remarkably robust, almost tangible.<sup>16</sup>

Before the self emerges, there is no 'other.' The mental construct of the self sets the stage for all relationships: with other human beings, with other objects, and with an 'other,' personal God. God, the oneness, is there all along. But as the ego splits itself off from this oneness, it invents and discovers all the 'others,' the isolated fragments of oneness. The ego affirms its aloneness by projecting and nam-

ing the other. Its most spectacular projection, its greatest affirmation, is a personal God.

The ego and its personal God are interdependent, mutually reinforcing. If I am a self, I need a personal God. Such a God anchors me, convinces me of my self. When I say, "I believe in God," I may intend various things, but one thing I am conveying is a deep need of my ego: that someone believe in me, believe that I exist as a separate self. So that I can believe in my separate self. A personal God redeems me by securing my sense of self. Conversely, such a God needs our affirmation. The Midrash cites Rabbi Shim'on ben Yohai's interpretation of a verse in Isaiah: "'You are my witnesses,' says *YHVH*, 'and I am God': "When you are my witnesses, I am God. When you are not my witnesses, I am not, as it were, God."<sup>17</sup>

The personal God and the ego participate in a secret covenant; one might call it a conspiracy. God's personality and mine share a pact of mutual admiration and sustenance. We confirm each other's apparent separateness. The mystical oneness of God undermines my separate sense of self. I am part of God's oneness. The separateness of my ego and the personality of God are illusory mirror images.

Who is made in whose image? Through eons of evolution, out of the oneness of it all, we have been fashioned, emerging as a conscious self. That self has projected a personal God in our own image, a God to whom we attribute our own creation.

The ego is a marvelous fiction, a necessary illusion. We don't really possess it; we are possessed by it. Not having one is unimaginable, an unbearable thought. If selves did not exist, anarchy and madness would rush in to fill the vacuum. There are good reasons for preserving the myth of the self as a particular, concrete thing, rather than an abstraction. That is why society invests such an enormous amount of time and energy in constructing a self that can accept moral responsibility. We need the ego. Madness and anarchy are not attractive alternatives. To put it less dramatically, if the phone rings we answer it and identify "who we are." As long as we live in the world, we cannot manage for very long without the self.

A personal God is appropriate for the ego. To the extent that I see my self as a separate entity, I can relate to such a God. This God reinforces the fragile ego, lending it stability and meaning. But the otherness of God and self can be maintained only by a tension that links them together. Though the ego insists on keeping its distance, something within is drawn across the divide. "As a deer pants for brooks of water, so my *nefesh* longs for you, O God."<sup>18</sup> Through a clouded lens the self dimly sees that it is part of something greater. It gropes for the oneness that remains just out of reach—a oneness obscured by having been projected as a divine you, by having been fashioned in a personal image.

The part yearns to rejoin the whole. In rare, eternal moments, the

self realizes it is no longer a fragment. It discovers a consciousness that is transpersonal: the entire universe becoming aware of itself. The image of a personal God gives way to oneness.

## Toward Oneness

We are fashioned in the image of oneness. We reflect oneness; we each refract it through the prism of our particularity. Each of us is a fraction of infinity. But a fraction of infinity is itself infinite. Even in our fractured state, we manifest infinity. Each of us is a particular expression of the oneness of the cosmos. I am a unique creation; yet my most basic physical substance, my quarks and atoms, are identical with the substance of an antelope, a redwood, a distant star.

You can't feel oneness all the time. You'd never get anything done. Worse than that, you'd kill yourself. If you're driving down the road, you don't want to become one with anything moving in the opposite lane. The challenge is to balance oneness and separateness, to acknowledge both. We usually remain convinced that we are separate, independent beings. But occasionally—at a waterfall, reading a book, taking a walk, hugging someone we love—we glimpse a trace of infinity; something inside us remembers the oneness.

According to one Hasidic teaching, God is delighted "when we become aware that only God exists." But another teaching advocates individuality: "God does not derive as much delight from us when we are all one

entity, as when we are individuals...For God desires us so that He can receive added delight from the detailed individuality within our separate bodies."<sup>19</sup> Each person expresses the oneness in her own way. What really delights God is the variety, the immense spectrum of being. In the words of the Ba'al Shem Tov, "God wants to be served in all possible ways."<sup>20</sup>

Divinity pervades the universe: sparks in every single thing, energy latent in each subatomic particle. We can raise the sparks, restoring the world to God. We become aware that whatever we do or see or touch or imagine is part of the oneness, a pattern of energy. Religion is transformed from a list of do's and don'ts into a spiritual adventure. The simplest, most mundane activity becomes an opportunity to expand awareness, to exercise compassion.

God is not some separate being up there. She is right here, in the bark of a tree, in a friend's voice, in a stranger's eye. The world is teeming with God. Since God is in everything, one can serve God through everything, by raising the sparks. In looking for the spark, we discover that what is ordinary is spectacular. The holy deed is doing what needs to be done.

God is not somewhere else, hidden from us, but rather, right here, hidden from us. Enslaved by our routines, we rush from one chore to the next, from event to event, rarely allowing ourselves to pause and open. Our sense of wonder has shriveled, victimized by our pace of life. How, then, can we

find God? A clue is provided by one of the many names of *Shekhinah*. She is called ocean, well, garden, apple orchard. She is also called *zot*, which means simply "this." God is right here, in this very moment, fresh and unexpected, taking you by surprise. God is this. ♦

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1. See Gen. 2:20; *Bereshit Rabah* 17:4.
  2. *Ma'arekhet Ha'elohut* (Mantua, 1558. Rpt. Jerusalem Meqor Hayyim, 1963), 82b. The author is unknown.
  3. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, tr. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963), 1:57.
  4. Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:58-59.
  5. See Daniel C. Matt, "Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism," in *Essential Papers in Kabbalah*, ed. Lawrence Fine (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1994).
  6. Judah ben Barzilai, *Perush Sefer Yetzirah*, ed S.Z. H. Halberstam (Berlin: Hevrat Meqitsei Nirdamim, 1885), 14; see also Arthur Green, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1992), 215.
  7. Cited by Gershom Scholem, "Schöpfung aus Nichts und Selbstverschränkung Gottes," in *Über einige Grundbegriffe des Judentums* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 84.
  8. *Confessions* 13:33.
  9. See Gershom Scholem, "Shekhinah: The Feminine Element in Divinity," in *On The Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken, 1991), 140-96; see also his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1961), 35.
  10. *Zohar* 3:291b; see Daniel C. Matt, *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1984), 186-87, 297.
  11. *Zohar* 2:176a; 3:141b.
  12. Jean Piaget, cited in Robert Ornstein, *The Evolution of Consciousness* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991), 97-8.

13. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, tr. Walter Kaufman (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 80; see also David J. Wolpe, *In Speech and In Silence* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1992), 31.

14. *B. Hagigah* 12a.

15. Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991), 356, 366, 423, 433; John Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

16. Dennett, 418,, 429.

17. *Sifrey*, Deuteronomy, 346, citing Isa. 43:12.

18. Ps. 42:2. *Nefesh* here means "being," "self," or "soul."

19. *Liqqutey Yeqarim* (Lemberg, 1865), 18b-c; Zev Wolf of Zhitomir, *Or Hameyir* (Warsaw: Meir Halter, 1883), *Ki Tissa*, 26d-27a.

20. *Tzavva'at HaRibash*, in *Shivhei HaBesht* ed. Benjamin Mintz (Tel Aviv: Talpiyot, 1961), 215.

# On Feminine God-Talk

BY TIKVA FRYMER-KENSKY

Passover is here as I write this, and we have been singing table songs around the Passover table. Joyfully we raise our voices: *Adir Hu, Barukh Hu, Gadol Hu, Dagul Hu. Hu. Hu. Hu. Hu*, "He. He. He. He." *He* is noble, *He* is blessed, *He* is great, *He* is outstanding. It is hard to miss the message, applied as it is with a sledgehammer: God is a *He*. As we say seven times: *YHVH, He is God, YHVH, He is God.*

Everytime we say a blessing in Hebrew, the message is underlined: *barukh ata YHVH*, "Be blessed, you He-God YHVH". Masculine verbal forms, masculine adjectives, masculine nouns unremittingly deliver the subliminal message: God is male. Even the nouns in the liturgy are masculine, in content as well as form: our father, our king, our mighty hero.

Alongside this liturgical message goes a theological one: God is not really male. God has no form, so *He* cannot be a male. Language is gendered, and that limits us, but God was never really male, and the *He* should be understood as generic or neutral. Religious leaders sometimes seem almost surprised that they should have

to state this: since God is not human, how could anyone believe *Him* to be male. Like a secret message to the initiates recorded at 33 1/3 r.p.m. on a 45 r.p.m. record, the theological message gets overwhelmed by the drumbeat of He's, Him's, King's and Father's. Every child hears that God is male; only the religiously sophisticated learn more.

There is some truth in the theological message that God, not being human, is also not male. The God of the Bible is not sexually a male, not a phallic figure. There is no worship of male sexuality, potency, or virility in the Bible. In stark contrast to the veneration of the phallus of male pagan deities, the penis of God is never mentioned. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that the God of Biblical Israel is **grammatically** male: all the verbal forms, adjectives and pronouns are masculine. God in the Bible is also sociologically male: the husband, the father, the king.

## From Language to Status

This cumulative impact of male-centered language and imagery is pro-

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foundly alienating to women. At the simplest level, it seems to carry intimations of masculinist theology: if God is male, then perhaps, every male is a little-bit of God. Even when this equation is avoided, we are left with a kind of "male club" to which God and men belong. God and men share *something* (undefinable) that women lack. This *something* is, more often than not, power, privilege and status. A vicious circle develops. Male images are used for God because they are images of status and power. The fact that these images are used for God then reinvests these male images with even more status and power. Women are completely left out of both the imagery and the power loop.

There is warrant in the Bible for using non-male, non-gendered and inclusive imagery for God. The book of Hosea (in which the gendered image of God-the-husband features so prominently) also draws many other metaphors for God. These include animal metaphors, notably the lion, and non-animal metaphors such as the tree. We can build on these and other non-personal biblical metaphors, such as God as Rock.

God-the-mother may be more problematic. The Bible abounds in passages describing God's role in procreation, God's formation, supervision and birthing of children. These are often taken as descriptions of God as mother. However, the imagery is still accompanied by masculine verbs, so that it conveys a message of a male God birthing. The cumulative effect can therefore be that as birthing is

considered divine it is also considered less female. If the God with womb and breasts remains male in our consciousness, then "He" will diminish women. The language with which we think about God has to become more gender-flexible before individual metaphors can begin to offset the masculine impact of our God-talk.

There is an undeniable need to introduce female God language. But the decisions to do so immediately presents a whole set of questions.

### What name can we use?

1. *Shekhinah* is the most obvious name that comes to mind. This is a name with a long venerable history. In rabbinic writings, the term refers to the immanent presence of God, and it is not clear whether this immanence was conceived in specifically *female* guise. In later writings, particularly mystical texts, the Shechinah is that emanation of God closest to our world, and is decidedly female. Moreover, in Kabbalistic writings, the ultimate unity of God towards which we aim is conceived as *yihud qudsba berikh hu ushekhinteyh* the (conjugal) union of the Holy One blessed be He and his *Shekhinah*. Moreover, the name has come into use among contemporary feminists and is now a well established name for God, particularly in the blessing formula *berukha at Shekhinah*.

However, the very popularity of this name presents a difficulty, for *Shekhinah* has become almost the female deity, rather than a female facet of God. This presents the real danger

that a message of God's duality will be delivered subliminally in much the same way that the maleness of God is currently conveyed. Moreover, the associations of the name *Shekhinah* with immanence, with the indwelling presence of God severely limit the use of the name. It is difficult to use the name *Shekhinah* in contexts of awe and transcendence, in those moments in which we acknowledge divinity beyond the limits of human sensation or conceptualization.

## 2. The Queen of the World, *Malkat Ha'olam*.

This is certainly an epithet that expresses transcendence. It would seem logical to express the *malkhut* in our blessing formula with the female. Should we say *Shekhinah malkat Ha'olam* or *YHVH malkat ha'olam*? The former gives us a nice balance between immanence and transcendence, but reinforces the idea that *Shekhinah* is somehow separate from *YHVH*. The latter is clearly a mix-and-match, but do people react to the concept of Queen the same as the concept of King? In English the problem can be finessed by using the de-gendered terms "ruler" or "sovereign," but Hebrew has no such neutral word. Even in English these gender-neutral terms do not have the rich associations or emotional affect of "king" or "queen."

## 3. The Queen of Heaven, *Malkat Hashamayim*.

At first sight, this has a nice ring, and seems a good poetic variant of *malkat ha'olam*. It conjures up images of the celestial heavens and the infi-

nite reaches of space, and has a resonance that seems biblical. Though its resonance is indeed biblical, it is quite negative. *Malkat hashamayim* is the Queen of Heaven that Jeremiah angrily tells us people were worshiping in the last days of the Kingdom of Judah. In Sumerian, the same words refer to Inanna, whose very name means "queen of heaven." The words are innocuous, but their associations may carry undesired connotations. In the same way, the word *Elah*, "goddess," seems at the same time appropriate and dangerous, as does the word *ba'al*, "master." The historical use of these terms to refer to pagan Gods gives them connotations far beyond the normal meanings of the words.

## 4. *Rahamema*, "the merciful one."

This term has recently begun to gain currency and status. It has the advantage of referring to one of the more appealing attributes of God: the compassion that extends beyond judgment. It seems particularly appropriate for the female for two reasons. "Mercy" and "compassion" are two attributes that have long been associated with women, even in the most pythagorean male-female dichotomization of the universe. The term itself is ultimately related to *rehem* ("womb") and reinforces the female-appropriate sense of "mercy." However, the fit carries its own dangers.

The derivation of "mercy" from "womb" has a long history in the ancient Near East and is found in the Sumerian *arus* ("womb") and *arus-sud* ("merciful") and in the Akkadian *remu*. It is certainly less misogynist

than the Greek-derived connection of “hysteria” with womb (Greek *hyster*). But it is not kept as an attribute of goddesses: *arus-sûd* is an epithet often applied to male gods. Does using *rahmema* as a name of God reinforce the idea that mercy is a female quality? If so, does that give human males the right or the obligation to act without compassion?

## Gender-neutral Names

Because of the difficulty inherent in using specifically feminine names, it may be best to stick to gender-neutral names. The term *elohut*, “divinity,” while gender-neutral in meaning, has the advantage of being feminine in form. This demands grammatically the use of feminine verbs and pronouns, thus countering the use of grammatically necessary masculines with *elohim*.

It is equally important to degender *YHVH* and *Yah*. These have always been considered the personal name of God, and need not be gender-specific. The name may derive from an imperfect (“the one who causes to be”)—indeed the imperfect was used for females in many Semitic dialects. In addition, this derivation may be false or folk etymology, for the name may derive from the sound of the wind in the desert rather than from a verbal form. Whatever its origin, the name is a *name* and can be degendered by being used with feminine verbs and adjectives.

The English term “God” also needs to be degendered. It too is not etymologically male. The female “Goddess”

not only contains intimations of paganism, but, like “poetess, authoress, Jewess, and Negress” is an out-dated and basically sexist female form that actually has a diminutive connotation.

Beyond the choice of names lies the gender of the adjective, the verb, the phrase, the sentence, the paragraph. These clearly need to be used in order repair the universal masculinity of religious texts, but the moment that we try to do so, we are faced with the necessity of making choices. Here the dangers are considerable, because there is a risk of undoing one of monotheism’s chief advantages. In a polytheistic system, where the divine is divided into masculine and feminine, earthly gender relations and expectations get projected into the divine sphere. This, in turn, gives sacred warrant to the status quo and acts to impede changes. To call upon God as father when we seek protection and God as mother when we seek compassion is to endorse and perpetuate a system in which men do not have to be compassionate and women do not have to be strong.

The epithets that we apply to God are the archetypes of our thinking. We need to avoid perpetuating stereotypes by our choices. We also need to understand the reason that we choose certain images. What does it mean to choose a young virile (man) soldier—*ish milhamah*—as our defender rather than an Ishtar-figure, an Amazonian woman-warrior? Does it mean that we believe that the man-warrior is more trustworthy? Or more malleable and control-

lable? And what would it mean to reintroduce this woman-warrior image?

## Archetypes and Ethics

Old, familiar images sometimes slide past our consciousness, their way facilitated by the fragrant oils of history, community, nostalgia and devotion. But problems arise whenever we try to modify them so that we can pay attention. If the “True Judge” is *dayyan emet*, a male judge, then do we reinforce the idea that men are the most trustworthy at forming legal decisions? How does that reflect on the women judges that we find in our courtrooms? At the same time, our discourse about justice and law has itself acquired gender connotations. If we call God our *dayyenet*, our female judge, does that imply that we are rejecting a “masculine” idea of judgeship for some putative notion of “the ethics of caring” or “relational justice,” which may or may not accord better with the “female voice”? Can we use *dayyenet* without bringing the whole current discussion of ethics into our prayer? Or does *dayyenet*, like *rahamema*, carry subliminal statements about this issue?

The other great metaphor for God, God-the-parent, can be kept in gender-neutral terms in English. But is gender-neutral also devoid of emotional resonance? And can we choose in Hebrew between “father” and “mother” without modifying the emotional timbre of each sentence? On what principle should we do this? Who is the economic support who gives *kalkalah* and *parnasah*? Who

provides succor in sorrow or support in disaster? Who has unending grace?

In determining new gender language, we are trying to steer clear of the old and now-recognized danger of divinizing maleness. But as we avoid this Scylla, we must also steer clear of the Charybdis of gender-stereotyping and sexualizing. God-the-female is not simply the mother who gives birth or the mother who nurtures. Women are more than wombs and breasts, and God-as-woman must reflect a transcendence of these sexual characteristics. To honor our mothers by understanding God as mother may include honoring gestation and lactation; it cannot be limited to this aspect of femaleness, however, without doing violence to the many different ways that women can be women.

## Toward a Multiple Image

Many of these difficulties can be met at least temporarily by a conscious decision to randomize the choice between male and female images and to mismatch the gendered names with the (in)appropriate adjectival and verbal forms. This might be our best way to approximate our newfound ability to convey multiple images visually, without words. In biblical times, words were chosen over graven images because of their relative impermanence and plasticity. A statue engraves a metaphor permanently, creating the distinct possibility that the metaphor will become confused with reality and will blot out the possibilities of using other metaphors. But with today’s technology, images have become more

plastic than words. The technology of "morphing" presents exciting possibilities for visually representing the multiple facets of divinity. Morphing images dissolves them into each other in what looks like a seamless way, compiling a visual image of transformation. A morphed image of God could incorporate all metaphors and genders into a constantly changing image of God-the rock-the tree-the father-the mother-the lover-the judge-the male warrior-the woman-warrior-etc.etc. We need to invest effort, time and money in creating morphed films of God and in using them extensively in our religious education, so that the concept of multi-faceted oneness sinks into our collective consciousness and remains there as we pray in randomly-gendered language.

The advantage of morphing is that it avoids the great danger of creating permanently gendered images of the attributes of divinity. Once the morphed image is primary, language can attempt to refer to it by multiplicity of images in multiple gender. But this is a very difficult task, because it requires great sensitivity to the dangers of gender stereotyping and to "biology as destiny." We cannot impose the burden of innovation and sophistication on each individual prayer-leader. Instead, we must consciously compose gender-random prayer-language to accompany this morphed image.

### **God's Consorts**

Uniting the genders into a single non-differentiated image of deity may

have an unavoidable side-effect: We may lose the many female "consorts" that Judaism has provided for God. In polytheism, consorts do not do much. Basically, they consort, and they give birth to the god's children. But the consort-image has provided one of Judaism's most powerful images for God: the lover/husband.

Once upon a time, in ancient Israel, God may have had a consort, the Asherah, who may herself have been a reflection of God's immanence and nurturing qualities. She was not an active deity, for even then the ancient inscriptions, such as the one from Kuntillet Ajrud, indicate that it is God (not the Asherah) who is the active source of blessing. Then, when biblical religion moved beyond the Asherah image it still acknowledged the power of erotic bonding by imaging "Israel" as the wife of God. The marital metaphor of Israel and God as husband and wife summons all the emotional power of male-female bonding and applies it to God's relationship to Israel. It captures both the intimacy and the terror of our closeness to God. Since Israel does not have equal power to God, the model of the marriage is patriarchal, and indeed the relationship contains great pain. Yet the metaphor also contains the promise of a future bonding without difficulties, a hope expressed by the prophets in the image of Zion as the future wife of God: "As a bridegroom rejoices over a bride, so will God rejoice over you," says the exilic prophet Isaiah to Zion (Isa. 62:5).

We sing these words every Friday night to another one of God's consort-images, the Sabbath. As the Sabbath is the foretaste of the perfect world to come, so too the Sabbath is the weekly "bride" who foreshadows this eschatological marriage. "Come, my beloved, to meet the bride," we sing to each other (and to God) in our beloved hymn *lekha dodi*. This poem contains many biblical verses originally addressed to the restored Zion. As Zion is the manifestation of divine "consort-ness" in space, so too Sabbath is its manifestation in time. And what about Israel? Elsewhere, Israel is also God's consort. But in this poem, (male) God and (male) Israel merge with each other as each unites with the Sabbath bride/queen.

The metaphor of God-and-consort also shines through our love of the Torah, whom we often image as a beautiful woman, desirable forever to God and to those who learn her. The impassioned love of Israel for wisdom, and for the Torah that is wisdom is a feature of both our literature and our liturgy. The alluring woman Torah is another avenue through which (male) Israel and (male) God come together.

In this understanding, the *men* of Israel are the husbands of Zion, of Sabbath, and of Torah. God-in-heaven and Man-on-earth share this love for the divine female and meet each other *in her person*: on the Sabbath, *in* the pages of Torah, *at* Jerusalem. The actual, physical women of Israel are invisible. The (men) kabbalists of Safed called out to each other and to God, "come, my beloved friend," as they went to the

fields to meet the bride on Sabbath Eve. The women were at home, not included in this salutation.

The women are no longer invisible, no longer waiting at home. What then can we do with this imagery? We could, of course, toss it out, but in doing so we would not only lose a large part of our traditional imagery but we would also deprive ourselves of its emotional effect.

### Reconstructing the Erotic

We can retain the power of the image of this beloved female in several ways. The simplest is to confine the image to woman-Israel and male God, so that all of Israel is subsumed under the "beloved" image—but this brings us right back to the problem of the essentially male God. Another step would be to encourage women to merge with the Torah and the Shabbat and explore what it means to become one with Torah or Shabbat. The possibilities for mystical merging are exciting, but there is a serious drawback. Such a metaphor of men merging with God and women with *Shekhinah*/Torah/Shabbat may not only reinforce masculine divinity, but it may also provide sacral justification for considering females secondary in all relations: after all, we do not pray to the Torah! Moreover—and equally dangerous—it perpetuates a notion of male activity and female receptivity, since the "lover" is God/Israel and the "beloved" is the Torah/Shabbat.

The third way to retain this erotic imagery is to specifically include women in the invitation to become

lovers of Torah, of Sabbath, of Zion, not by “translating” themselves into men, but by keeping their identity as women and being encouraged to feel passionate devotion to the woman-imagined Shabbat/Torah/Zion. This means abandoning or transcending the heterosexual aspect of the erotic metaphor. It acknowledges the power of female-female bonding and, at its best, creates an image of love that goes beyond heterosexuality/homosexuality and reaches for an eros that goes beyond gender. The dangers in attempting to use homo-erotic imagery in our current, phobic intellectual climate are obvious and do not need repetition. The value, however, is equally enormous, as it would be liberating for both men and women. Women could be included fully in this traditional mode of Jewish spirituality;

men and women could be released to express passion and devotion to *elohut* in all divinity’s forms.

There is danger in degendering the image of God, danger in incorporating feminine forms for God, danger in re-imagining erotic sexuality. But these dangers cannot be deterrents. We have eaten of the fruit of knowledge, and innocence can only be maintained by a conspiracy of silence. Once someone has pointed out that the traditional language is not inclusive, that women are not really included in a “He” and that motherhood is not honored by a “Father in Heaven,” then it is clear that the emperor has no clothes. We cannot go back. Despite all the difficulties involved in determining the best way to make God-talk less dehumanizing, we cannot abandon the attempt. May the Force be with us! ♦

# Image and Imagination: The Revealed and Hidden Faces of God in Jewish Liturgy

BY ELIEZER DIAMOND

Whenever I hear the words, “Sovereign of the universe,” I am transported to the High Holidays of my youth, when I listened to interminable declarations that God was King of the universe. I waited, sometimes stoically and sometimes furiously, for the torture to end. I resented the God who seemed to need so much praise as Supreme Being, but was apparently indifferent to the discomfort this process was causing at least one of his creatures.

Today, I recite those same prayers that I heard as a child and I have become one of the faithful who declare God king. What has made this transition possible?

One important factor has been a gradual change in my understanding

of God’s kingship. As a child I heard “king” as “tyrant.” God was an oppressive presence, whose main tasks, it seemed, were to point out my failings and punish me for them—a figure not very different, as Freud would be only too happy to remind me, from my father (as imagined by me in my angrier moments). As an adult, my conception of God’s kingship is quite different. I take comfort from God’s willingness to take responsibility for the universe; I am happy knowing that behind the apparent chaos and disorder around me there is a strong, guiding hand. Furthermore, knowing that the cosmos is ruled by a power greater than myself frees me from the quixotic task of attempting to manage the

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world. Instead, I seek to find my place within it.

And yet, while I may have made my peace with describing God as king, the peace is an uneasy one. The image of the oppressive, indifferent tyrant still stalks me on occasion. God, the king, moves in and out of the shadows, now a benevolent protector, now a narcissistic despot.

### Overcoming Cognitive Dissonance

Anyone who has ever prayed from a traditional prayerbook can probably identify with the experience of cognitive dissonance I have just described. Cognitive dissonance results from praying with images of God that one finds archaic, false or repugnant. The desire to reduce such dissonance has motivated much of the prayerbook reform of recent years. My goal in what follows is twofold. First, I will present an approach to the problem of cognitive dissonance other than liturgical reform, an approach which I believe is implied by a Talmudic discussion of our problem, a passage which I will cite and analyze at length. Subsequently, I will describe possible applications of this model in one's daily prayer life.

The Talmudic passage in question is providing an etiology for *anshey keneset hagedolah*, "the men of the Great Synod," the title given to a legislative body that the rabbis claim functioned in the early Second Temple period,<sup>1</sup> and supposedly formulated and instituted statutory prayer:<sup>2</sup>

A. R. Joshua b. Levi said: Why were they called men of the

Great Synod? Because they restored the crown of the divine attributes to its ancient completeness.

B. [For] Moses had come and said: The great God, the mighty and the awesome (Deut. 10:17).

C. Then Jeremiah came and said: Foreigners are reveling in His temple. Where, then, are His awesome deeds? Hence he omitted [the attribute] awesome [in his prayer found in Jer. 32:17ff.].

D. Daniel came and said: Foreigners are enslaving his sons. Where are His mighty deeds? Hence he omitted the word mighty [in his prayer in Dan. 9:4ff.].

E. But [the men of the Great Synod] came and said: On the contrary!<sup>3</sup>

F. Therein lies His might that He suppresses His inclination and extends long-suffering to the wicked.

G. Therein lie his awesome powers, for but for the fear of Him, how could one [single] nation survive among the many nations?

H. But how could the [earlier] rabbis [i.e. Jeremiah and Daniel(!)] abolish something established by Moses?

I. R. Eleazar said: Since they knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, insists on truth, they would not ascribe false [things] to Him.<sup>4</sup>

As in the case of many aggadic narratives, ours is both textual exegesis and theological meditation. As textual exegesis, the narrative attempts to bridge the discrepancies among the characterizations of God by Moses, Jeremiah and Daniel. Each describes God differently, not, according to the rabbinic reading, because of fundamental disagreements about God's nature, but rather, because each in his own subjectivity experiences God differently.

What is the theological agenda of this tale? Jeremiah and Daniel seem to be stand-ins for the supplicant who is at odds with the fixed liturgy. Let us not forget that the phrase discussed in this narrative, the great God, the mighty and the awesome, is an essential component of the initial benediction of the Amidah. Thus Jeremiah and Daniel represent the person who is faced with these words and cannot recite them in good faith. What is to be done?

### **Contradictory Solutions?**

Interestingly, our aggadah offers two seemingly contradictory solutions to this problem. The first is a midrashic or, if you will, imaginative solution. One can describe God as mighty and awesome, no matter how catastrophic the present course of Jewish or personal history; in order to do so, however, one must concede that God's might and awe may be manifest in new and unanticipated ways. At first blush, we would expect an awesome God to chase the invaders from God's temple; upon further reflection,

however, we realize that while the temple was destroyed, the nation was not, a fact arguably attributable to the awe in which God and God's people were held. In this outcome, the rabbis chose to see God's self-restraint, which was at least as significant an exercise of God's might as the exercise of raw, aggressive power. By expanding or changing our notion of God, then, we can continue to affirm the traditional description of God's ways.<sup>5</sup>

The passage in Yoma presents a second resolution that seemingly clashes with the first. Our narrative concludes that—the argument of the men of the Great Synod notwithstanding—Jeremiah and Daniel, praying as they were to the God of Truth,<sup>6</sup> were right not to ascribe to God attributes they could not discern.

How can the Talmud have it both ways? Either Jeremiah and Daniel were wrong to delete divine attributes from the list formulated by Moses (and canonized by the men of the Great Synod, in the rabbinic view, as part of our liturgy) or, as the narrative seems to conclude, they were justified in doing so.

### **Balancing the Individual and the Community**

Following in the footsteps of the authors of the Yoma text, I would like to offer a resolution to the aforementioned conundrum, which is both textual exegesis and theological speculation.

If, as suggested earlier, Jeremiah and Daniel represent the individual supplicant, and the men of the Great

Synod represent the fixed communal liturgy, perhaps Yoma intends to distinguish between statutory and individual prayer, or, even more subtly, between public act and private intention. In my private prayers I am free, and perhaps divinely obligated, to describe God in accordance with my personal perception. Indeed, we find rabbis of the Talmudic period doing just that.<sup>7</sup> In my private recitation of fixed liturgy, moreover, I am entitled to mental reservations. I must say the words, but I need not claim to experience them as being true.

Thus, the individualism implied by the end of the Yoma passage must be counterbalanced by the communitarianism inherent in the view of the men of the Great Synod. While I may not perceive God's might, I must always remember that my own perceptions are limited. I must be open to the possibility that the truth ultimately lies with the perception of the meta-historical faith-community embedded in the liturgy. Moreover, I must be desirous of discovering the truth of the communal description of God, saying, as did a Talmudic rabbi requesting rain in the dry season, "We have heard, O God, our fathers have told us the deeds You performed in their time, in days of old' (Psalms 44:2), but we have not seen this with our eyes." What we have here is partly a challenge, but also a prayer: "I do not experience your wonder, God, and I wish to be proven wrong." Thus, a Jeremiah who is asked if he discerns God's awesomeness should respond not with a denying "No!,"

but rather with a Rosenzweigian "Not yet."

This latter point is implicit in the Yoma narrative, or at least in its choice of biblical texts. Jeremiah and Daniel both lived in periods of exile and destruction, while the Great Synod came into being during the return to Zion and the restoration of the Temple. From the vantage points of the men of the Great Synod (as filtered through the rabbis), Daniel and Jeremiah could not envision the redemption that was to dawn shortly. Jeremiah's prayer came in response to God's command during the siege of Jerusalem to purchase land in his birthplace of Anathoth (32: 6-8). In the prayer where Jeremiah omits the attribute 'awesome,' he questions the prudence of purchasing land in Judea, when its capital is about to be overrun by Nebuchadnezzar's troops, and its people are to be exiled (32: 24-5). Similarly, in the prayer where Daniel omits 'mighty' in addressing God, he is asking why the prophecy of Jeremiah, namely, that redemption would come after seventy years of exile (see Jer. 29:10), is not being fulfilled (Dan. 9:1-19). Because they bring their doubts before God and ask for enlightenment, Jeremiah and Daniel learn that they cannot foretell the denouement of God's plan, nor fully understand its workings.<sup>8</sup> Redemption will come, and it will then be clear that God's might and awe, which seemed so long absent, were present throughout.

In the Yoma narrative, this truth is put in the mouths of the men of the

Great Synod, both because they can testify personally to the truth of God's promise, and because they represent the meta-historical community of Israel, whose redeemed, beloved condition transcends the particularities of history.

### **Naming and Describing God: Four Approaches**

Before applying this principle of balancing the individual with the community to our own problems with liturgy, we must first consider why characterizations of God are so central to liturgy. Historically, there have been four arguments for the importance of naming and describing God: 1) the **petitionary**, 2) the **theurgic**, 3) the **theological** and 4) the **exemplary**.<sup>9</sup>

The first view is encapsulated in the dictum of R. Simlai, a late third-century Palestinian rabbi: "A person should always recount God's praises before petitioning Him."<sup>10</sup> Unless we understand this directive to be merely a matter of religious etiquette, it implies that God can be swayed by human flattery, an implication that was rejected vigorously by other rabbis of the Talmudic period.<sup>11</sup>

The second view, most popular among Jewish mystics, is that by intoning particular divine names and attributes, we call forth certain powers in the Godhead.<sup>12</sup>

The third approach, the theological, views prayer, at least in part, as catechism. In describing God, therefore, one is defining one's theology. This position is associated with the

medieval Jewish philosophers, particularly Maimonides.<sup>13</sup>

The most eloquent spokesman for the exemplary viewpoint is Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. In his view, prayer is an act of effrontery, given the chasm that separates the divine from the human. Each word of prayer must therefore be justified before it can be uttered.<sup>14</sup> He suggests that enumerating God's attributes can be seen as a partial fulfillment of the Biblical dictum, "And you shall go in His ways" (Deut. 28:9).<sup>15</sup> We internalize God's attributes by reciting them in prayer; subsequently, we are able to employ these attributes in molding our own behavior.<sup>16</sup>

### **Enriching My Understanding of God and Self**

My own prayer life, and therefore my approach to describing God, is based on a relational and self-reflective conception of prayer. My prayer is relational in that I mitigate my existential loneliness by experiencing God's presence.<sup>17</sup> Prayer is self-reflective in that it causes me to consider new and different constructions of the self.

First and foremost, I am reminded that I am a small, temporary manifestation of a majestic, eternal reality. This realization helps me to make peace with my mortality.<sup>18</sup> Second, as God's subject, I envision myself as God's earthly emissary; "God has many messengers,"<sup>19</sup> say the rabbis, and each of us can choose, through our speech and actions, to be one of those messengers. Third, I confront

aspects of myself of which I am often unaware outside of prayer. Prayer includes vidduy (confession),<sup>20</sup> which means making a total and honest reckoning of my strengths and faults.<sup>21</sup> Then, by imagining and describing God, and by thinking of myself as imitating or responding to these images, I begin to find new metaphors with which to describe myself. In short, by reimagining God I reimagine myself.

I would now like to consider a number of images of the divine, some of them explicit, others only implied by the liturgy, and explain how they enrich my understanding of God and of myself.

As I already indicated, one of the most common images of God in the traditional liturgy, and one of the most difficult for me to assimilate, is kingship. For me, the key to making this potentially oppressive image a meaningful part of my prayer life is the medieval rabbinic saying, "There is no king without a nation."<sup>22</sup> This dictum reminds me that God depends on me for kingship; without my allegiance, God's majesty is diminished. Declaring God as king, rather than being an act of self-abnegation, becomes an acknowledgement of my own significance and responsibility.

As God's servant, I am a partner in God's reign, and I am obligated to extend that reign in at least three ways. First, by reminding myself that God is king, I remind myself of my identity as God's servant, and I recommit myself to serving God in speech and action. Secondly, I seek in

my daily behavior to serve God by acting in accordance with the teachings of God's word, the Torah. Finally, if I indeed act as God's servant, I witness to God's kingship through my verbal and behavioral interactions with those around me.

God is also described frequently in our liturgy as judge. This image also strikes many of us as being harsh and punitive. My approach to this attribute has been to interiorize it; that is, I identify "judge" with the "still, small voice" (I Kings 19:12) of my conscience. In doing this, I do not intend to dilute the reality of God as my judge, nor do I wish to claim the right of judgment solely for myself. On the contrary, I am arguing that even when my experience of the world about me suggests that, "There is neither justice, nor judge,"<sup>23</sup> my internal voice reminds me, and is a component, of God's judging and guiding presence. This is at least one of the senses in which I understand the biblical injunction to heed God's voice.

Other important images I have of God are not explicit in the liturgy, but are nonetheless crucial to my relationship with God. One such image arises from the liturgy surrounding the wearing of tefillin. As one winds the strap of the tefillin three times around one's middle finger, one recites the following verses from Hosea: "I will betroth you to myself forever; I will betroth you to myself in righteousness and in justice, in kindness and in mercy. I will betroth you to myself in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord" (2:21-22). In the original context, the speak-

er in these verses is God, who is espousing Israel. These verses are of a piece with other marital images used in Hosea 2 to describe the relationship between God and Israel.

How are we to understand the symbolism of these verses in their liturgical context? Some commentators understand the “I” to be not God, but Israel, who, by binding to itself the tefillin, which contain portions of the Torah, is thereby becoming espoused to God’s Torah. The “I” can also be understood as God, who is espousing me by placing—through my agency—three rings around my finger, corresponding to the three times God says in the verse, “I will espouse you.”

### Encountering My Feminine Self

This ring imagery obviously evokes a wedding ceremony. In placing the tefillin’s straps around my finger, I imagine myself as a woman being espoused by a male divine lover/husband. This imagery suggests the possibility of intimacy with God. It is not enough for me to know that God is present; I wish to experience delight in that presence, and, thinking of God as spouse and lover, makes that delight possible. In reimagining myself as a woman, I can examine what Jung calls my “shadow self.”<sup>24</sup> I am convinced that biological character differences do exist between men and women, but that both men and women share to some extent both sets of characteristics. I am called upon during most of my waking life to engage in mascu-

line behavior, as defined by me and my community. During prayer, as I don my tefillin and think of myself as being espoused to God, I am awakened to the femininity within me. This both puts me at peace with this aspect of myself—for clearly it is part of God’s gift to me—and reminds me that I may call on my feminine persona not only during prayer, but in the rest of my life as well.<sup>25</sup>

In the case of the tefillin liturgy, it is I who take on an unaccustomed gender role. I now wish to explore a ritual in which, for me at least, God’s gender is transformed from its conventional masculinity. I refer to the wearing of the tallit, and specifically, the verses one recites immediately after wrapping oneself in the tallit:

How precious is Your faithful care (hasdekha), O God! Mankind shelters in the shadow of Your wings (kenafekha). They feast on the rich fare of Your house, You let them drink at Your refreshing stream. With You is the fountain of life (meqor hayyim); by Your light do we see light. Bestow (meshokh) your faithful care (hasdekha) on those devoted to you (leyodekha) and Your beneficence on upright men (Ps. 36:8-11).<sup>26</sup>

The incorporation of these verses into the tallit ritual constitutes a process of rich reconceptualization. Note, first of all, that the root of the word meaning “Your wings” is the same as that describing the corners of one’s garment, on which one is commanded to put ritual fringes in the third paragraph of the Sh’ma (Num.

15:37-41). Seen in this light, the corners of one's tallit are transformed into the sheltering presence of God.<sup>27</sup> This leads me to think of the first evidence of God's protective presence in my life, my mother's womb, which protected me, nurtured me, and allowed me to enter this world. I think of my mother and her womb, therefore, as an extension of God's motherly love and care for me.

This imagery is continued and augmented in the next psalmic verse, which speaks of the rich fare of God's house and God's refreshing stream. In biblical culture (and in rabbinic culture too),<sup>28</sup> it is the woman who is the preparer and provider of rich fare. Think, for example, of the praise offered the capable wife in Proverbs 31:15: "She rises while it is still night and supplies provisions for her household, the daily fare of her maids." Even more suggestive is the "refreshing stream." For me, the image of a nursing mother is invoked, which in turn reminds me of the nursing and nurturing women—Shifrah and Pu'ah, Yokheved and Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter—through whom Israel and their future leader were sustained in the face of Egyptian oppression.<sup>29</sup>

The subsequent verse in the tallit ritual introduces more female imagery. While meqor often signifies 'spring' in the Torah, and is presumably the literal meaning of the term, it also has the meaning of vagina or womb, the spring from which blood and life flow.<sup>30</sup> This verse can be understood to mean, therefore, that

God is, in a deep sense, our birth mother.<sup>31</sup>

The final verse also includes female images of God, but of a different kind. Meshokh and hesed appear in tandem in one other Biblical verse: "The LORD revealed Himself to me of old. Eternal love I conceived for you then; therefore I continue My grace to you" (meshakhtikh hesed; Jer. 31:3). The image in Jeremiah, however, is that of lovers, not of parent and child.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the verse in Psalms speaks of faithful care being extended to yodekha, "those who know You." The root yada sometimes signifies sexual knowing, as in Genesis 4:1: "Now the man knew (yada) his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain." Through this chain of associations, the mother evoked by the previous verses can be reconceived as a lover.

For me, this dialectic represents the tension of the divine-human encounter. At times, I seek to be intimate with God's protection, that which a child seeks from a mother. At other times, I seek the intimacy of the lover—to interpenetrate with God and thereby erase the boundaries between the human and the divine. This last verse from the tallit ritual reminds us of this yearning, even as it reminds us that it is in God's hands to deny or grant the divine presence.

The thesis underlying all of the above is one for which Michael Wyschogrod has argued recently with great passion and intelligence.<sup>33</sup> God is not a static, transcendent philosophical idea, but a dynamic person who engages humanity in many dif-

ferent guises.<sup>34</sup> The rabbis propounded this view, and addressed the theological pitfalls inherent in it, in the following passage in the Mekhilta:

“The Lord is a man of war” (Exod. 15:3). Why is it said “The Lord is his name” (15:3)? For at the sea He revealed himself as a warrior making battle, as it said, “The Lord is a man of war,” while at Sinai He revealed Himself as an elder full of compassion, as it is said, “and they saw the God of Israel” etc. (Exod. 24:10 ff.)....Now, in order to give no opening to the nations of the world to say, there are two Powers, Scripture reads, “The Lord is a man of war, the Lord is his Name,”—the same in Egypt, the same at the sea, the same in this world, the same in the world to come, as it is said, “See now that I, even I, am the same...” (Deut. 32:39)<sup>35</sup>

Just as a single human being has many facets to one’s personality, so too does God, the Living One, appear to us with many different faces and speak to us with a variety of voices. To tamper significantly with the liturgy we have received is to run the risk, it seems to me, of remaking God in our own image.<sup>36</sup> Better to engage the prayers we have received, and, bringing to bear our individual imaginative faculties, encounter the God each of us is meant to find. ♦

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1. Whether such a body actually existed is far from clear. See a review of the literature in I. J. Schiffer, “The Men of the Great Assembly”, in W. S. Green ed., *Persons and Institu-*

*tions in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Missoula, Mt.: Scholars Press, 1977), 270-273.

2. See *Berakhot* 33a and *Megillah* 17b-18a.

3. The speech that is here put into the mouths of the Men of the Great Synod is based on the appearance of the phrase *ha-el ha-gadol ve-ha-nora* in Neh. 9:32. Neh. 9 describes an assembly in Jerusalem in Ezra’s time at which the Israelite men commit themselves not to take wives from the surrounding peoples. As part of the convocation, the Levites offer a prayer that contains the aforementioned phrase. The rabbis apparently are identifying these Levites as members of the Great Synod.

4. *Yoma* 69b. The translation is, with minor changes, that of L. Jung, *The Talmud* (London: Soncino Press, 1974).

5. It is worth noting that the definitions of might and awe implied in our text are to be found explicitly elsewhere in rabbinic literature. Regarding ‘might,’ see *M. Avot* 4:1: “Ben Zoma said:...Who is mighty? He that subdues his [evil] nature.” Regarding ‘awe’ as a constraining force, see *M. Avot* 3:2: ‘R. Hanina the deputy of the High Priest said: pray for the peace of the ruling power, since but for awe of it men would have swallowed up each other alive.’ See also David Hartman, *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 215-216.

6. See R. Hanina’s statement on *Yoma* 69b: ‘God’s seal is truth.’

7. See, for example, the petition of R. Hiyya b. Luliani on *Ta’anit* 25a. In at least one case, also on *Ta’anit* 25a, a rabbi is divinely punished for being extreme in his negative characterization of God: ‘Levi decreed a fast [in time of drought] and the rains did not fall. He said before God: Master of the Universe, You have ascended to heaven and dwell there, and you do not have compassion for your children. — The rains came and Levi became lame [as punishment for his effrontery].’

8. *Jer.* 32:42-44 and *Dan.* 9:20-27. It is widely agreed that *Dan.* 9 was composed during the Maccabean revolt, and the ‘exile’ in question is actually the subjugation of Judea to the Seleucid dynasty.

9. My thinking on this subject has been heavily influenced by Shalom Rosenberg, "Prayer and Jewish Thought: Directions and Problems" [Hebrew], in *Ha-tefilah ha-yehudit: hemshekh ve-hiddush* (Jerusalem: Institute for Judaism and Contemporary Thought, 1978), pp. 85-130.

10. *Berakhot* 32a (= *Avodah Zarah* 7b).

11. See the discussion in *Avodah Zarah* 7b-8a, and Joseph Heinemann's remarks in his *Prayer in the Talmud*, trans. R. Sarason (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1977), 184-185.

12. See Martin Cohen's discussion of the fusion of liturgy and theurgy in early Jewish mysticism in his *The Shi'ur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism* (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 1982), 68-71.

13. See, in particular, M. Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963), I, 137-143.

14. J. Soloveitchik, 'Reflections on Prayer' [Hebrew], *Hadarom* 47 (1979), 87.

15. Some medieval codifiers list Deut. 28:9 as one of the 613 commandments. However, see Maimonides' comments in *The Commandments*, trans. C. Chavel (London: Soncino, 1967), II, 380-381 (The Fourth Principle).

16. Soloveitchik (1979), 93, attributes this view to Maimonides, based on a juxtaposition of Maimonides' remarks in the fifty-fourth and fifty-ninth chapters of the first book of *The Guide of the Perplexed*. I do not find Rabbi Soloveitchik's interpretation of Maimonides entirely convincing.

17. See J. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 53-58.

18. Compare Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 113-116.

19. Cited in Rashi's commentary to Ex. 16:32.

20. While confession is most prominent in the prayers of Yom Kippur, daily confession is an essential component of the weekday Amidah. The sixth benediction begins, "Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned; pardon us our king, for we have transgressed."

This and all following translations and citations of the liturgy are taken from the *Daily Prayer Book*, ed. and trans. P. Birnbaum (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1949).

21. See J. Soloveitchik, "Catharsis", *Tradition* 17 (Spring 1978), 52-54.

22. Bahya ibn Asher, *Kad hakemakh* (Sedlikow, 1836), 87a.

23. *Y. Kiddushin* 4:1, 65b and parallels.

24. C. G. Jung, *The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York: Penguin, 1976), 144-48.

25. I have suggested to women who have rejected wearing tefillin because of what they see as the inherent "maleness" of the experience that this might be all the more reason for them to wear tefillin and thereby engage more fully their masculine self.

26. *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

27. Compare the wordplay surrounding *kanaf* in Ruth, discussed in my "Chronology or Characterization? The Case of Midrash Ruth," *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly* (1990), 164.

28. This is true, of course, of rabbinic culture as well. Here is the explanation of Abbah Hilkiah, a rainmaker of the rabbinic period, of why, when both he and his wife prayed for rain his wife's prayers were answered first: 'My wife is the one normally found at home [when the poor and hungry come to the door] and [that which she gives, i.e. food] has immediate benefit, while I normally give money, which does not have immediate benefit' (*Ta'anit* 23b).

29. See the juxtaposition of nursing and stream in Ex. 2:7-9. For a recent discussion of the role of Shifra and Pu'ah in the redemptive process, see Naomi Bromberg Bar-Yam, "Delivering a Nation: Retelling the Revolt against Pharaoh," in *Reconstructionist* 57 (Spring, 1992), 12-14.

30. See, for example, Lev. 20:18, which forbids sexual relations between a man and a menstruant woman: 'He has laid bare her flow (*mekor dameha*) and she has exposed her blood flow (*meqarah*). See also Lev. 12:7. This meaning of *meqor* is also utilized by the rabbis; see *Ketubot* 7b.

31. See Nidah 31a, which speaks of God as one of the three partners, along with the two human parents, in the creation of each human being.

32. Compare the call of the lover to her beloved in Song of Songs 1:4: 'Draw me (*mashkheni*) after you, let us run!'

33. See Wyschogrod, 82-86, especially 84.

34. In this connection, see C.S. Lewis's wry, but powerful argument that anthropomorphic descriptions of God are both inevitable and desirable (C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 75-76).

35. J. Goldin, trans., *The Song at the Sea* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 126-129.

36. Compare the remark of Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1990),

137: "the story of the golden calf...recognizes the temptation for society to worship itself through its own symbols."

# Beyond Naming: Reflections on Composing *The Book of Blessings*

BY MARCIA FALK

If you are looking for the heart and soul and bones of Jewish prayer, you will find them all in the blessing. A blessing—in Hebrew, *berakhab*—is an event; a blessing is also that which turns a moment into an event. Blessings intensify life by focusing our attention on our actions, increasing our awareness of the present moment.

As a poet, I have long been drawn to the lyric intensity of the blessing, and for the past twelve years, I have been composing new blessings, in Hebrew and in English, as vehicles for new visions, steps toward creating Jewish feminist theology and practice. Over the course of that time, my own theology took many turns, all of which became part of the creative process, influencing the forms of my liturgical

work. Because I never turned away completely from any place on the journey—never rejected my early blessings in favor of new ones, just kept moving on to create more—what I find today, as I compile my blessings in book form, is a variegated and layered collection.

Looking back over the period during which the book evolved, I see that the first blessings I wrote were actually based quite closely on the traditional *berakhot*; they exhorted the community to bless, or praise, or seek out, the divine presence in relation to specific occasions, such as beginning a meal, or ushering in a holiday. Yet they departed sharply from the traditional blessings in offering new images for divinity—images that called into question the rabbinic depiction of

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God as lord and king. Because my theological metaphors were specifically created to resonate with the particular occasions being marked, and because all my language and imagery was rooted in biblical, rabbinic, and payyetic sources, my blessings could be read as a kind of *midrash*, or commentary, on the tradition. Here, for example, is one of the very first blessings I composed:

קדוש לחגים חדשים  
 נברך את עין החיים  
 מצמיחת פרי הגפן  
 ונשור את שריגי חיינו  
 בקסרת הדורות.

*Kiddush Leḥaggim Ḥadashim*  
*Nevarekh et eyn haḥayyim*  
*matzmiḥat peri hagefen*  
*venishzor et sarigey hayyenu*  
*bemasoret hadorot.*

### Blessing over Wine for New Holidays

Let us bless the wellspring of life  
that nurtures fruit on the vine  
as we weave the branches of our lives  
into the tradition.

My early blessings caught on especially quickly; they circulated informally across the country, where a range of communities—including Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative, havurah-style, feminist, and unaffiliated groups—began using them. It was not long before people were extrapolating from my blessings to write new blessings of their own. This was gratifying, in that it meant the work was standing the tests of use. Yet the results were dis-

turbing to me. I had thought of my early blessings as *prototypes* only in a limited sense—that is, I saw them as starting points in the creative process. I had never intended them to become *archetypes*, in the sense of blueprints for later compositions. I was surprised—and, frankly, dismayed—when I heard people talking about my image *eyn haḥayyim*, “the wellspring, or fountain, or source of life,” as my substitution for *Adonay Eloheynu, melekh ha’olam*, “the Lord, our God, king of the world”—as though my aim were merely to replace one icon with another. I had argued strongly that *Adonay Eloheynu, melekh ha’olam* was a dead metaphor—that is, an image of divinity that no longer functioned metaphorically but had become instead an idolatrous name for the unnameable, reinforcing patriarchal power and male privilege within society. I did not believe that the alternative to *Adonay Eloheynu, melekh ha’olam* was a substitute name for divinity, since all names and images are necessarily partial. Rather I had proposed that we set in motion a process of ongoing naming which would point toward the diversity of our experiences and reach toward a greater inclusivity within the monotheistic framework. I also argued for the importance of doing this liturgical work in Hebrew, and, as an example of what I was calling for, I offered several new images of my own—among them, *eyn haḥayyim*.

I was even more concerned when it seemed that the opening of my blessings over bread and wine, *Nevarekh et eyn haḥayyim*, “Let us bless the source of life,” was coming to be seen as a new

prayer formula, intended to substitute universally for the opening of the traditional blessing. Just as I had never advocated a substitute name for the divine, the creation of new prayer formulas was very far from my earliest designs. Such a project contradicted my core convictions about what constitutes authentic prayer—convictions I had tried to embody early on in my work.

For example, in my new *havdalah* ritual—which was among my earliest liturgical compositions, written in 1983—I had offered two new theological images besides *eyn habayyim: nishmat kol hay*, literally, “the soul, or breath, of all living things,” and *nitzotzot hanefesh*, literally, “the sparks of the spirit, or soul.” As *eyn habayyim* was an image of water, water drawn from the earth, so *nishmat kol hay* and *nitzotzot hanefesh* were images of air and fire. Taken together, I thought that these three metaphors might begin to suggest the presence of divinity in the whole of creation; I believed that no single image alone could evoke that awareness in the same way. My *havdalah* also introduced two variations for the verb *nevarekh*, “let us bless”: *nehalleh*, “let us praise, or celebrate” and *nevakkesh*, “let us seek.” For it struck me that just as divinity could be imaged in a myriad of ways, so prayerful action could take a great variety of forms—and the search for these, too, became part of my poetic process.

Indeed, each variation led to further ones. Over the years, as I continued composing blessings, I experimented with a range of lyric form, probing the potential of lyric expres-

sion to evoke spiritual awareness. Thus I found myself varying not just words and images but whole syntactic formations. The creative process replicated the spiritual journey—or perhaps I should say that it *was* a spiritual journey, rich with the gifts of discovery and of surprise. So too, I wanted the products of my labor to evoke discovery and surprise in the reader, the pray-er. As I moved further and further away from the exhortative syntax of my original blessings, I found myself attempting to suggest the presence of the divine in less obvious and predictable ways—until, at a certain stage, I found I was no longer using images directly to point toward divinity at all.

Thus many kinds of blessings appear side by side in *The Book of Blessings*—along with poetry and meditations that supplement the blessings and themselves form other kinds of prayer. Among the different blessings are quite a few that may seem to contain no specific reference to the divine. For example, my morning and evening blessings focus on a spiritual state of gratitude, deliberately leaving open the object of the emotion, which may be supplied by the pray-er. My handwashing blessings make reference to holiness, *kedushah*, in an attempt to evoke heightened awareness of the interrelationship of body and spirit. “Blessing of the Children” echoes words spoken by the biblical God to suggest divinity within the human self; “Blessing the Beloved” adapts lines from the biblical Song of Songs to convey reciprocal

human love. My new blessings of commandment embed a sense of the sacred in human actions. My blessings for cycles of time—such as the new week and the new month—bestow good wishes upon others or seek goodness for one's self or one's community. And my new *birkat halevanah*, "Blessing of the Moon," takes the form of an extended personal reverie, a contemplation of the redemptive state.

Where is the divine in all of these? Nowhere in particular—yet, potentially, everywhere that attention is brought to bear. For that reason, I suppose, one could call them "atheist" or "pantheist"; yet for me both these epithets miss the point. If the divine is everywhere—as many monotheists believe—or, to put it slightly differently, if everything is capable of being made holy—as rabbinic Judaism seems to teach with its scrupulous attention to the many details of ordinary life—then surely we needn't worry about localizing divinity in a single apt word or phrase. We may find it wherever our hearts and minds, our blood and bones are stirred.

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Here is my new evening blessing, with which I close each day:

בְּרָכָה לְקִרְאָת הַשָּׁנָה  
 חֲבִלֵי שָׁנָה עַל עֵינַי  
 וְהַנּוֹמָה עַל עַפְעָפַי,  
 מְלֵאָה נַפְשִׁי הוֹדְיָה  
 עַל מַתְנוֹת הַיּוֹם,  
 מְלֵאָה נַפְשִׁי הוֹדְיָה  
 עַל מַתַּת הַיּוֹם.

*Berakhah Likra't Hashey nah*  
*Hevley sheynah al eynay*  
*utenumah al afapay,*  
*mal'ah nafshi hodayah*  
*al matnot hayom,*  
*mal'ah nafshi hodayah*  
*al matat hayom.*

**Blessing before Going to Sleep**  
 Sleep descending,  
 on my lids,  
 on my limbs,  
 I call to mind  
 the gifts of the day—  
 the gift  
 of this day—  
 and give thanks.

# Postmodernism, Jewish Theology, and Naming God

BY JANE R. LITMAN

*"And she called the name of YHVH who spoke to her, 'God as I See You.'"*

Genesis 16:13

U ntil very recently, twentieth-century Judaism has propounded two generally held views of God. There is the pre-modern male God of the Torah and the Siddur who superintends the universe, dispensing reward and punishment; and there is the modern rational naturalist God—in Kaplanian terms, the "power [not Being] which makes for salvation." Kaplan's language originates in a world in which power meant great achievements such as the electricity delivered by the Tennessee Valley Authority, not the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl.<sup>1</sup> The pre-modern God is moral, patriarchal, almighty—a king, father, man of war, lord; the modern God is rational, distant, and progressive—a power, force, source, wellspring.

The debate between these two metaphoric visions of God created a great deal of vitriol through the early years of the twentieth century, and

still flares up occasionally, since theologies tend to have a very long shelf life. Much of the contemporary Jewish world has uneasily accepted the presence, if not the validity, of both views. For example, the Conservative Movement in its statement of ideological principles, *Emet Ve'emunah*, uses this approach: "For many of us, belief in God means faith that a supreme supernatural being exists and has the power to command and control the world through His will....Some view the reality of God differently....He is, instead, present when we look for meaning in the world."<sup>2</sup>

## The Holocaust as Caesura

Both traditionalism and modernism still have their contemporary followers, however much the debate has been interrupted by the theology-shaking event of the Holocaust. The Holocaust created, in the words of Arthur Cohen, a "caesura," a theological impasse which invalidated both the pre-modernist and modernist views of God.<sup>3</sup> According to Richard Rubenstein and

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the modernists, the Holocaust represented the death of the already tottering traditional God; no thinking person would pay homage to an almighty judging God who used Hitler as his tool.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, according to Irving Greenberg and the traditionalists, the “burning children” of the Holocaust were the death of modernity: no thinking person would freely choose an amoral system based on technological advance without sacred purpose.<sup>5</sup> According to this view, modernity contained no hegemony of moral righteousness. To the traditionalists, the horrors of the Holocaust doomed classical modernist Reconstructionist theology, even as it flourished in affluent postwar America.

I would suggest that postwar Jewish theology has experienced post-traumatic stress disorder, a frozen horror of facing and assimilating the Holocaust. In North America, it was fully two decades after the Holocaust that the major ideas of Richard Rubenstein, Irving Greenberg, Eliezer Berkovits, Hannah Arendt, and Emil Fackenheim were published, and almost four decades before these ideas reached maturity. The most potent of Holocaust theologies is Elie Wiesel’s narrative theology, the story of God’s presence and absence. As in post-traumatic stress treatment, it is the retelling of the significance of the trauma, rather than its analysis, that is the most compelling statement of Holocaust thought. It is tempting to view all Holocaust theology—whether Wiesel’s narrative, Rubenstein’s critique, or Greenberg’s avowal

of continued traditional faith—through the lens of the psychological stages of loss discussed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: denial, anger, bargaining, grief, and acceptance.<sup>6</sup>

Time and distance, however, eventually mediate discontinuity. In the 1990’s, after three decades of serious post-Holocaust theology, the old pre-Holocaust traditionalist/modernist debate continues. The caesura is increasingly bridged, and Holocaust theology takes its place (large, but not obscurative) with AIDS, the Armenian genocide, atrocities in Bosnia, the crushing of a four year girl in the Northridge earthquake, in the general category of theodicy.

### The Old Debates Persist

As the Holocaust recedes from center stage, the classic pre-modern view of God is having a neo-medievalist renaissance. This is particularly true in Israel, in which it is tied to a number of political and economic issues, but also in North America, where the critique of modernity is potent. Who could have imagined that the dawn of the third millennium of the common era would be heralded within the Jewish polity by serious claims of imminent Messianic redemption, a return to pre-modern fundamentalist theology reduced to the pop symbol of a bumper sticker proclaiming, “We Want Moshiah Now!”<sup>7</sup>

In more sophisticated traditionalist circles, Michael Wyschogrod makes a radical anti-rationalist claim that humanity is hopelessly adrift, mistakenly proud of the “accomplishments”

of modernity; in this morally bankrupt situation, the only hope for the Jewish people is a return to a personal God who corporeally elected Israel and revealed the Torah to Moses.<sup>8</sup> In liberal circles, Eugene Borowitz propounds a covenantal theology, which, despite his claim to postmodernism,<sup>9</sup> is an interesting blend of existentialism and traditional theology.

The modernist rationalist perspective also continues to claim adherents. Harold Shulweis, one of its most articulate proponents, presents a compelling view of a natural universe in which God does not interfere in the physical workings of nature, but is spiritually available to people in times of need. Shulweis, the religious naturalist, avoids the problematic of theodicy by locating the God-idea as a force within humanity, as opposed to the natural world.<sup>10</sup> Arthur Green has combined classical modernism with mysticism to create a theology based on experiential immediacy mediated through the understanding of human psychology.<sup>11</sup>

Both Borowitz's covenantal existentialism and Green's rational mysticism drift toward postmodernism. Both philosophies, in different ways, acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of traditional God imagery while emerging out of a thoroughly modern world view.

## **The Implications of Post-Modernism**

Postmodernism originated in disciplines far from theology. Literary criticism, the sociology of knowledge, physics, and philosophy have recently

begun to evolve a worldview that critiques the modernist model of cause and effect, linear evolution, objective perspective. According to a postmodernist perspective, human knowledge is not linear, but always embedded within its larger contexts and always, therefore, changing. Human knowledge and thought is always situated within the contexts of politics, history, geography, culture, and biology. From chaos theory to deconstructionism, there is a postmodern acknowledgment that there are many forces in the universe which are complex, subtle, and interwoven in ways that humans may never comprehend. The more we as humans know, the more we realize what we don't know and in all probability will never know.<sup>12</sup>

This assertion is not a denial of the benefits of modernity, nor a retreat from science, technology, or the knowledge that can be obtained through them. It does not invalidate, for example, the theory of evolution, as the Creationists claim. Just because modernity did not live up to the romantic expectations of society does not mean that, perforce, the pre-modern God-mythos is the only alternative, or even a particularly attractive one. Rather, a postmodern perspective allows us to say that modern naturalism arose from its context, just as a pre-modern moral vision arose from its. Both are the theological self-constitutions of the Jewish people; they exist linearly and side by side, continuing a process of self-reflection and self-construction, as individual Jews and the Jewish people engage them.

According to postmodernist thought, theology—along with science, art, in fact, the totality of human endeavor—is both the product of, and consumed by people who are situated in a context. Postmodernism, as articulated by such thinkers as Michel Foucault<sup>13</sup> and Jacques Derrida,<sup>14</sup> postulates a subjectivity and relativism that permeates all human enterprise. Humanity as a whole, the individual, the universe as perceived by humanity, are in a state of constant self-construction, a coming from and going to, which is non-linear, and knows of no ultimate objective destiny or measure, nor is in need of one.

Theology is inescapably political, intransigently relative, momentary, evolving, constructed, and multifaceted. This postmodernist insight is hinted at in the latest prayerbooks of both the Reform and Reconstructionist movements, which each contains multiple services and wide diversity of God-language and imagery.

## How Post-Modernism Challenges Us

Our challenge is to find meaning within relativity, to both accept and simultaneously reject nihilism. I am constructed by my situation—the heritage of the Jewish people, the worldview of contemporary American academia, my physical self—and I construct the situation of others, often, but not entirely, in ways I do not fully understand. I am both free and bounded,<sup>15</sup> universal and particular.

Meaning is inherent in both particularity and universality. What do I, as

a feminist rabbi of the baby boomer generation living in California, have to say from my unique perspective, which can also resonate with the readers of this article, some of whom might not even yet be born? How does my historically-situated contact with God illumine the human condition?

According to deconstructionist literary thought, this text is a conversation between me and you. As your situatedness, your larger context, alters, so do the implications of the text. Thus the text I write changes in its understanding and interpretation even after it leaves my computer screen.

If perhaps God is the ultimate eternal against which this radical historicity is measured, the perspective is nonetheless mine, and ultimately yours. Our situatedness is the beginning of the conversation, not its end. If I assert the humble position that you and I are but two of four billion, it is also true that we are the two who are writing and reading this essay. Our particular context is unique, yet interwoven with history, biology, community, eternity.

## Toward Post-Modern Jewish Theologies

Postwar American Jewish theology has increasingly acknowledged the particularist perspective, the fragmented moment of encounter. Neil Gilman's recent theology of Judaism, is aptly entitled, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew*,<sup>16</sup> and is possibly the first coherent postmodern Jewish theology. The

postmodern insight of relativity and situatedness often appears to shatter a previous holism. Yet the fragments are related to one another, even if the particular constellation of relatedness cannot be easily articulated. Gillman presents a web of perspectives: Torah, Maimonides, Will Herberg, Yehuda Halevi, midrash, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Martin Buber, Norman Lamm, Mordecai Kaplan, Franz Rosenzweig, Abraham Heschel, Immanuel Kant, Sigmund Freud, Paul Tillich, Albert Camus, Plato, and dozens of others. He allows structure to emerge from these "fragments." Following a postmodern program, Gillman's last chapter is a "how-to" primer on "Doing Your Own Theology," thus empowering the reader to take up a theological perspective.

Of course, even Gillman's collection of fragments is itself but a situated reconstruction. From my perspective, it is missing much of the emerging theological discussion of our day. The absence of feminists such as Judith Plaskow, Marcia Falk, Rachel Adler, and Drorah Setel seems, from my situatedness, a great void. Where also are the renewal theorists, Zalman Shachter-Shalomi, Arthur Waskow, Sheila Weinberg, and others? I miss the voice of Howard Eilberg-Schwartz discussing neo-tribalism and embodiment; of Daniel Boyarin, Rebecca Alpert, and Julie Greenberg tackling sexuality, liminality and God. My collection of fragments includes Torah, midrash, Sigmund Freud, Spinoza, Camus, and Tillich, but also Emma Goldman, Peter Berg-

er, Susan Griffin, Starhawk. I can have a conversation with Neil Gillman, because we share so many fragments, but my perspective, my intellectual (not to mention social, economic, biological) context will inevitably be different.

The acknowledgement of situatedness preempts some of the most divisive problems associated with theology. Authority and limits are organic, any imposition or declaration of limits (or lack thereof) is illusory. The answer to the question of authenticity—is this Jewish?—is always embedded in context. Those who are experimenting with new Jewish theologies emerge from their own contexts; one can assume a certain degree of resonance with other Jews of similar context. Thus, the rhetorical question of traditionalists, "if all Jews tomorrow, woke up and professed faith in, say, Allah, would this be Judaism?" is easily answered. Yes, it would be Judaism; and, no, it won't happen. Sudden radical causeless theological discontinuity is not possible.

When feminists experiment with female God/dess language, it is because our society as a whole has radically redefined women's place. Five hundred years ago Jewish women would be unlikely to have the education, social standing, or desire to articulate theology, not to mention the lack of audience. In the body of Jewish fragments, there will always be some degree of marginality for women. Feminists use their socially acquired insights about mar-

ginality, hierarchy, and gender difference, to create new, but not discontinuous perspectives on God. Some of these stand the test of time; others are “kleenex liturgies,” used once and thrown away. But even “kleenex liturgies” often touch and impact the world of Jewish theology in subtle and complex ways.

Similarly, the Jewish renewal language of neo-Buddhism, countercultural Hasidism, social justice, and gender equity is enormously appealing to a population of Jews who locate some of their most meaningful moments in the social insights of the 1960’s and their aftermath. Contemporary Jews’ ability to appropriate these insights for theology represents a source of great promise for outreach and Jewish continuity. To put this sociological process in theological terms, it is an amazing testimony to the power of God that Tikkun editor Michael Lerner and the Lubavitcher rebbe, are not only in the same universe of discourse, but even on the same planet of discourse.

### **Reconfiguring the Present along with the Past**

Among Jewish thinkers who are avowedly postmodernist, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz’s cogent analysis of the Jewish modernist drive to disembodied God, and his own self-aware counter-polemic to re-incarnate God and face the gender issues attendant upon an embodied God, arises from current multi-disciplinary theories concerning spirit/matter duality;

attempts toward the integration of biological and physical science into psychology, sociology, and religion; and from contemporary thought on body representation and construction.<sup>17</sup> Eilberg-Schwartz both acknowledges his perspective and operates out of it. In his work as a theorist and biblical anthropologist, not only are the fragments of the past constantly reconfigured, but so too are those of the present in which we are situated. Our situated perspective is, of course, all that we have.

Post-modernism is not a determinist system; it assumes both choice and boundedness, autonomy and authority (which, as a democratic humanist, I prefer to call “relatedness”), particularity and universality, and a radical humility. There is just an awful lot that we do not and cannot know.

It is obvious that the biblical and rabbinic theological mythos of creation, revelation, and election is the source of what we have come to call traditional Jewish thought and values. One could similarly make the case that Western European modernity is also product of alienated Jews—Freud, Marx, Adler, Durkheim, Boaz,<sup>18</sup> Einstein—whose experience of dislocation led them into numerous academic disciplines favoring originality and rationalism. Modernity is thus in some fundamental way also a deeply Jewish endeavor.

But postmodernism? At first, it seems an alien thought-structure like medieval Aristotelianism or existentialism or feminism, into which Jewish ideas do not easily fit. I believe,

however, that just as Judaism has developed Aristotelian, and existentialist, and feminist forms, so contemporary Judaism can develop in harmony with postmodern thought. The postmodern insight of individual relativism was long ago articulated in the Jewish exposition of the phrase *Elohey Avraham, Elohey Yitzhak, v'Elohey Yaakov* (and in our day) *Elohey Sarah, Elohey Rivkah, Elohey Leah, v'Elohey Rakhel*, namely, that God appears differently to each person. The insight of historical and communal situatedness has long been important to Jewish perceptions of reality.

The postmodern perspective asks for a certain level of introspection and self-revelation. Since I am the moral agent of this work, this conversation, why am I writing this article? Not merely because postmodernism is the current “hot” intellectual organizing principle, nor because, as a baby-boomer, I am hopelessly faddish. I am making it available as a tool to enhance our appreciation of diversity in God-language and imagery. I am a complex and multifaceted human being embedded in a complex and multifaceted universe. I appreciate, am challenged by, find interest in, a diversity of God-images. I find meaning in traditional God-language, in creative God-language, even in non-Jewish God-language. The diversity of perspectives is helpful in formulating my own. That might be because of my genetic constitution, my

upbringing, my academic world—to fully explain would be to write an autobiography (which, as I indicated about Elie Wiesel, can itself be a form of theology). I am comfortable and empowered in my Jewish agency. I feel warmly cradled in the web of existence I have articulated.

My theological program is primarily the same as Gilman's, that is, encouraging Jews to “do your own theology”—to find your own name(s) for God. It is an interesting feature of Jewish theology that the most sacred representation of God is like the name of the rock star who used to be Prince, ineffable, and thus a perfect vehicle for eternal and infinite projection/ relation. It is only when we insist upon using the word “lord” as the concretization of the elusive that we have totally missed the point.

Politically, in terms of God language, I am more sympathetic to the theological product of the rationalist naturalists, the renewal mystics, the existentialists, the feminists, and the body/sexuality theorists than to the traditionalists, because the former inhabit the larger world I choose and desire. But I've found that in varying contexts all of them “work” to some degree. I make no claims to essential truth, nor even to superficial consistency. I do claim that consistency is inherent and organic, and finally, that if there is any ultimate objective unsituated reality, human language does not name it.

## Finding Your Name(s) for God

"And she called the name of YHVH who spoke to her, 'God as I See You'"  
(Gen. 16:13)

Hagar is the only person in the Hebrew Bible to name God. Hagar—the nobody, the slave, the woman, the Gentile—encounters God, and then finds the words to describe her sacred experience. Just as Hagar did, so can you or I.

1. **Take yourself and your religious experience seriously.** Many Jewish people feel that their vision of God is silly, inauthentic, heretical, unscientific or irrational. Allow yourself to see that your theology can be a core element of Jewish identity and continuity.

2. **Collect your sources.** Does Martin Buber make sense to you? Heschel? Plaskow? Do you like the

language of the traditional Siddur? What works and what doesn't? Write your thoughts down.

3. **Expand your collection.** Investigate some new material, such as the sources noted in this essay. Keep asking yourself what works and why.

4. **Find a community with whom to pray.** Share your thoughts about the Divine with the group and listen to the ideas and insights of others. Rabbinic tradition tells us to find a teacher and a friend with whom to study. It isn't strictly necessary, and a book can be the "teacher," but working with others can make the process easier.

5. **Choose some sacred language** that is meaningful for you. Practice using this language for God in prayer and discussion.

6. **Encounter God.** Name your experience. Believe in yourself.

1. My thanks to Professor Norman Mirsky for providing me this valuable insight.

2. *Emet Ve'emunah*, 18 Note that both the pre-modern supernatural God and the modernist meaningful Presence are male.

3. Arthur Cohen, *The Tremendum, A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

4. Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1966).

5. Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust," in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust*, ed. Eva Fleischner (New York: Ktav, 1977).

6. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

7. Even as I write this article, the major earthquake in Los Angeles which destroyed

the file containing my rough draft, is widely welcomed by both Christian and Jewish theological literalists as yet a further sign of the fulfillment of biblical prophecy prior to the advent of the Messiah.

8. Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

9. Eugene Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991).

10. Harold Schulweis, "From God to Godliness: Proposal for a Predicate Theology," *The Reconstructionist* 41 (Feb. 1975), 16-26.

11. Arthur Green, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1992). See the review elsewhere in this journal.

12. For a brief overview of postmodernism, see Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western*

*Mind: Understanding the Ideas that Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Ballantine, 1991), 395-410.

13. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan-Smith (New York: Irvington, 1972).

14 Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question.*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989).

15. Critics of postmodernism, such as Charlene Spretnak, *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Post-Modern Age* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991) claim that postmodernism, like modernism, privileges human autonomy and that postmodern rela-

tivism is even more disconnected and dissociated than modernist technological mechanism. I disagree. I see postmodernist situatedness as presupposing a holistic relatedness; that is, we are all strands of yarn; but we exist in a tapestry.

16. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990).

17. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "The Problem of the Body for the People of the Book," in Eilberg-Schwartz, ed., *People of the Body: Judaism from an Embodied Perspective* (Albany: State Univ of New York Press, 1992).

18. Dr. Gelya Frank pointed out to me that anthropology is also a Jewish science.

# Connecting God's Names and My Name: A Spiritual Journey

BY SHOHAMA HARRIS WIENER

Prayer will not move us substantially unless the velocity of our feelings breaks the sound barrier. It will not matter what name or names we use for God unless there is a desire to connect—to have a relationship that affects the way we live. The great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber has called this the I-Thou experience. Who is the Thou?

God (the Thou) appears to each of us in the way we need to be reached, teaches a midrash on the burning bush. When God spoke to Moses, it was with the voice of his father, so he would not be frightened.<sup>1</sup> Later, when Moses asked God for God's name, he was told, "*ehyeh asher ehyeh*" (Ex. 3:14). It is a name filled with alternative meanings—"I am that which I am," or "I am that which I will be"—a name that connotes being, without any descriptive limitations. The Bible, Siddur, and rabbinic literature contain many names for God, each reflecting a different aspect or attribute of divinity experienced by spiritual seekers.

These names have been used as vehicles for comfort and growth, with the understanding that beyond all these names there is only One who is named.

For me, the equally important question has been: "Who is the I?" What is the name or what are the names God has for me? What spiritual significance do these names have? As we are *betzelem Elohim* (in the image of God), we, too, are filled with complex ever-evolving meanings.

This sacred search for a spiritual name is aptly described by Julius Lester: "...While on retreat at the Trappist monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts, one of the monks told me, 'When you know the name by which God knows you, you will know who you are.' "I searched for that name with the passion of one seeking the Eternal Beloved. I called myself Father, Writer, Teacher, but God did not answer. Now I know the name by which God calls me. I am *Ya'akov Daniel ben Avraham veSarah*. I have

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become who I am. I am who I always was. I am no longer deceived by the black face which stares at me from the mirror. I am a Jew.<sup>2</sup>

Like Lester, I was drawn to search for the deeper name, the name that would call forth those aspects of my soul waiting to be birthed. Before I knew the work psychologists were doing in synthesizing psychological and spiritual processes, I experienced the need to explore the relationship between a self yearning to grow and a Spirit calling forth the growth. The place of interface was the name. My name. God's name.

What follows, then, is a very personal essay on the major changes that have appeared in my more than half a century of life, changes in the way I address God, and in the "I" who addresses God. I sense the widespread hunger today for personal spiritual experience and hope that my willingness to reveal aspects of my journey will encourage others to search and to share. It is in our searching and our sharing that we truly meet the One.

## My Prayer, My Journey

"Dear God. You who have created me, nurtured me and guided me. You who have been with me in the garden of childhood, the wilderness of adolescence and young adulthood, and the promised land of maturity, how shall I speak of You and Your Name?"

The answer comes. There is only one way to speak of The Name, and that is with the clear truth of the now—with the best vision, the most open heart, and highest courage I can summon.

When I was a child, I talked to God with simplicity. In English. My name then was Charlotte. Although I knew the blessings, they were not for me a connection to God, only a conduit for my Judaism. But God was the one I could ask for help, especially with tests. God's name was "God."

Somewhere around the age of twelve, I became conscious that there was something amiss in praying, "Dear God, let me get a 100 on my test tomorrow." I began to think in universal terms, and the likelihood of a God who listened at all seemed doubtful. From that point until my mid-thirties, I hovered between atheist and agnostic. This attitude was reinforced by my studies at Wellesley and Harvard in the early 60's, the "God is dead" era.

As I look back, I regret that I did not know of Reconstructionism, of Mordecai Kaplan and his thought, and that my prayer book did not offer choices like *meqor habayyim*, Source of Life, or *hey ha'olamim*, Life of all the worlds. I think I could have accepted a universal principle, a source of life and energy as a working definition for God, and that this would have kept me from feeling so alienated from Judaism.

However, I did not have any religious role models at this period. God's name was for me an anthropological relic, used seriously only by primitive-minded believers. In the few times a year that I dutifully attended services, I read the prayerbook by skipping over **all** the names of God. It seemed better to be an honest agnostic than a

hypocritical believer. Honesty may generally be the best policy, but in my case it only led to frustration. It was particularly troubling when my children asked to attend Religious School, and my daughters would sit up in bed talking to the one whom they called God. Most problematic of all, they chose to prepare for Bat Mitzvah, and I faced the position of being a fraud in front of the Ark, mouthing words of prayer I could not claim as my own.

This all changed on the first day of Sukkot, 1978, when once again, I spoke to God. It was an experiment born of great personal pain and longing. I wasn't sure there was a God, so the conversation ran something like this. "Dear God. I don't know if You exist as a listening being, but if You do, and You let me know You are listening, I promise that I will listen back, and act upon that listening." Following this, I went to morning services, and read the prayers as they were written, speaking God's names each time they appeared.

By the end of the service, I knew I had been heard. All my senses had shifted, my heart was aroused, and it was as if the sanctuary had been redecorated in living color. I left that morning with an inner commitment to study for an adult Bat Mitzvah. During my course of study I contemplated the varied names of divinity in the prayerbook and Bible. Each one had its significance, and its power to take me into exciting and mysterious worlds.

The strongest name for me, however, was *Elohey Avraham*, God of Abra-

ham. I felt that, like Abraham, I had been called to leave my father's house and go on a journey, destination unknown. This God of Abraham was an enormous source of Love, compelling me to search out the breadth and depth of Jewish tradition, and moving me onto a path of service.

At times I sensed this God sending energy that felt both physically passionate and male. It was not from an old man on a throne with a white beard, but a man of charm and virility, more like the midrashic handsome young man with dark curls whom the children of Israel saw as their rescuer from the straits of Egypt, or the lover in *Shir Hashirim*, the Song of Songs.<sup>3</sup> I was experiencing immanent, divine male energy in connection with prayer, Torah and Shabbat.

My friends and relatives wondered about my sanity, but I knew that I had found a Reality too powerful and too enticing to be ignored. As I delved deeper in my study of Hebrew, it became clear to me I needed to speak with this God as my God, and that I needed a Hebrew name to make the fullest connection.

## My Name and God's Names

I tried taking the Yiddish name I had been given at birth, Shulamis, and making it Hebrew, Shulamit. For six months I tried. It wasn't working. I didn't feel like Shulamit and I was losing my ability to pray. I felt intuitively that I needed a name that would let me draw in more strength and wisdom.

I thought of Avram who became Avraham, of Sarai who became Sarah,

and of Hoshea who became Yehoshua, each one receiving a new name for a new mission in life. I prayed for guidance. It came through the vessel of a Hebrew dictionary. Having decided that I needed to keep a connection to the grandfather for whom I was named, Shlomo, I systematically began looking at all the words beginning with the letter shin, the first letter of Shlomo.

When I came to *shin-hey-mem*, I stopped. Every variant seemed to reach out and speak to me. The letters stood for *Shlomo hamelekh*, Shlomo the King, and for *shirey hama'alot*, the Psalms of Ascent, my favorite group of psalms. These letters also spelled a word, *shoham*. *Shoham*, the sacred mother-stone, was an onyx stone worn by the High Priest on his shoulders with the names of the tribes inscribed on it. It seemed like more than coincidence that onyx was my favorite stone.

When I meditated on the name *shoham* I could feel my whole self expand in response to its sounds. Further research revealed kabbalistic meanings that resonated for me in an awesome way. Here was a name I could spend a lifetime trying to become worthy of, a name that would draw forth from God those qualities I most sought to receive and impart—love, wisdom, holiness and peace. All that remained to make the name perfect for me was to add the letter *heh* at the end, making it sound more feminine, and emulating our forebears who added to their names a letter of God's name.

For the next seven years, praying in the synagogue was a joyous adventure, and while I encountered various struggles with aspects of traditional theology and practice, I found nourishment in the prayerbooks of all the streams of Judaism. The masculine tone of the siddurim served me well, as I needed to draw in male strength to enter the world of rabbinic leadership. This balance changed dramatically in the mid-eighties as I began to read about and experience the contributions of Jewish feminism.

## Feminist Naming

God now appeared to me in a new form. The change was announced by a vision of Miriam that I experienced while meditating in my Sukkah in 1987. Miriam replaced Abraham as my main ancestor guide, and *Mayim Hayyim* (Living Waters) became my new name for God's presence.

I found myself exploring intensively the worlds of meditation and healing, and spending more time with nature and creative rituals, and less with the synagogue and Jewish texts. I had connected with *Shekhinah*, the female aspect of Divine energy that is both out-there (the Matrona, consort of the *Qadosh Barukh Hu*), and in-here (the Indwelling Presence). *Shekhinah* became for me both creative life-force and heartbeat of every part of the universe. My spiritual center had moved, and I was moving with it.

Once again, the prayerbook had become problematic, a stumbling block to my relationship with God. I realized the problem was not with

God, nor with the names of God in the Torah, but with the standard substitution for *Yud-heh-vav-heh*, *Adonay*, which means "my Lord." *Adonay* is a very limiting substitution for *Yud-heh-vav-heh*, because it implies maleness and a God who rules through domination. The word *Adonay* makes me uncomfortable, unless I become absorbed in the musical elements of davvening, which take me to a place beyond words.

*Yud-heh-vav-heh*, the four letter name of God, can also be rendered as *Hashem*, The Name. *Hashem* was and continues to be a name I relate to with love and warmth. According to one line of kabbalistic interpretation, the *yud* and *vav* represent maleness, the two letters, *heh*, represent femaleness; the first three letters, *yud-heh, vav*, God's transcendence, and the final *heh*, God's immanence. The letters also represent God as perceived through actions, feelings, thought and being. This name, The Name, includes all God's names. When I davven by myself, I pronounce *Yud-heh-vav-heh* as *Hashem*.

My problems with the liturgy were present even in feminist services. It wasn't any easier for me to say *Berukhah at Shekhinah* than to say *Barukh ata Adonay*. A female goddess? I was raised to shudder at the thought. Yet I have seen her frequently the past few years, in my meditations and visions. Her presence comes both from on-high and from very-near; she is beautiful, immensely loving and serene. I know she is the counterpart

to the male energy I encountered in prior years, and because of her, I have finally begun to feel pride and enjoyment in singing praises to *Shekhinah*.

Many of my rabbinic colleagues are upset with the use of feminine God-language, because they think it implies duality, and not the One that Judaism affirms. This is not my problem. Jewish mysticism has long recognized the male and female elements of the Godhead, and the need to unite them. *Leshem qudsha berikh hu ushekhinteyh* ("For the sake of the unification of the Holy One Blessed be He and His *Shekhinah*") is a kabbalistic phrase said before many prayers and blessings.

The struggle I had and still have is that I believe strongly in the importance of *klal Yisra'el*, in keeping the Jewish people together as one large family. It is meaningful to me that wherever I go in the world, I can join in prayer with my family. There are times when it is comforting to say the same words my ancestors have said for thousands of years. Moreover, there are times when a name I have rejected or ignored comes alive for me with new meaning. For the sake of Jewish continuity, the next generation must know the traditional words, and have the opportunity to encounter the spiritual heritage of our past.

Nevertheless, my soul cries out for change, and for balancing the hierarchical, male names for God that predominate in traditional Siddurim with feminist alternatives. I applaud the Reconstructionists for offering choices in their new prayerbooks. Choice

brings a freshness and vitality to prayer. Individually and collectively, we change from moment to moment.

In this last year, I have felt a new shift, a new name for God. I see it as shimmering white light; I hear it as *Noga*, Bright One; I feel it as Love. Bright One does not have a gender, but does have a heart, reminding me of the Talmudic expression, *rahmana liba ba'ey*, the Compassionate One seeks the heart. Bright One is tran-

scendent and fills me with awe, but also with joy. I can merge with Bright One, and return as my self with a new radiance. I no longer want to wear much black onyx, and seek out the colors of the rainbow. The journey continues, and I trust in it. ♦

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1. *Shemot Rabah* 3:1.

2. Julius Lester, *Lovesong*, Henry Holt, NY, 1988, p.1.

3. See *Shemot Rabah* 23:8; which cites in this connection, *Song of Songs* 5:10.

# Contemporary Jewish Theologies: An Essay Review

BY JONATHAN BRUMBERG-KRAUS

Arthur Green, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992)

David Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993)

Edward Feld, *The Spirit of Renewal: Crisis and Response in Jewish Life* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1991)

Contemporary Jewish theologues tend to have two purposes. The first is to draw alienated Jews back to Jewish spirituality—to a sense of the transcendent presumably missing and longed for in our lives. The second purpose is to critique and reconstruct Judaism's own barriers that block the way to the spirituality Judaism has to offer.

I propose four criteria that these new theologies will have to meet if they are going to bring alienated people in to Judaism and remove the spiritual and social barriers that presently keep them out.

1.) **Theology must be rooted in the myths that shape our lives**—subconscious archetypes, “root metaphors,”

whatever we call the stories, images, role models beneath the surface of our conscious reflection, which shape the way we see the world.

2) **Theology must be responsive to the needs and experiences of the Jewish community**, the people it addresses—Jewish men *and* women.

3) **Theology must provide the believer with a feeling that the world is meaningful, coherent, orderly.**<sup>1</sup> We already experience enough needless suffering, inhumanity, random acts of destruction and chaos in the world every day. If a theology of Judaism just affirms this chaos, without offering any desirable alternative vision of the world, why stick with Judaism? Why keep exposing ourselves as the one of the world's favorite victims?

4.) **Theology must hold out some kind of hope for redemption.** If a Jewish theology cannot promise me that Judaism can somehow better my quality of life, or the quality of life in the world, again, why bother?

These criteria should provide a good measure of how well the recent

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works under review here meet the tasks of modern Jewish theology.

### *Seek My Face, Speak My Name*

Arthur Green's *Seek My Face, Speak My Name* is particularly compelling for the powerful Jewish mythic images it provides to conceptualize the relationship between God and people, and between God and world. The title itself alludes to the two important root metaphors of his theology: seeing God's face in a mirror, and the world as God's Name.

Green opens the book with a tale of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, which he says is to be taken as the story of Green's own quest. In this story, a king sent his closest advisor to collect the one portrait missing from his collection of portraits of kings, that of a mighty king from a distant country, the country of lies. The king of that country reveals himself to the wise man, only after the latter's praises shrink him to nothing. The wise man paints the king's portrait, and brings it back to the first king. Green's brief interpretation of the story evokes the image of God appearing to God's self, and thus to us, as if through a mirror:

The reader first thinks there must be two kings, one at the beginning and one at the end. As we begin to think about the tale, however, the two turn out indeed to be one. It is a new and unique portrait of himself that the original king demands of the seeker. But once the two kings turn out to be one, we are forced to ask whether king and seeker

are not also separate aspects of the same self. When the curtain is thrown aside, what is it that both king and seeker see? *Is it not the human being, made in the "image and likeness of God" the king sees? And is it not that very image and likeness that is revealed to the seeker?* Do not both king and seeker see in that moment that their otherness is not so "other" after all?<sup>2</sup>

### The World as God's Name

The other root metaphor Green uses is the notion of the world as God's Name.<sup>3</sup> Rooted in the kabbalistic system of the *sefirot* and theory of Torah, the image provides a connection between the phenomenal world and the Torah of Judaism, so rich in its ethical and ritual implications. Studying Torah, doing Torah (acting out the specific and distinctively Jewish commandments of Torah), and simply being in the world are all nothing less than the articulation of God's Name. Thus, living a Jewish life and *being* in the world are both different expressions of the same flow of divine energy.

Given this theological position, Jews can gain a mythic rationale to respect and protect not only aspects of God's Name preserved in Jewish traditions, but can also come to see nature and ecology as other aspects of the same ground of being—"God's Name." For Green, celebrating creation through the distinctively Jewish *mitzvah* of Shabbat, or through the ecological *mitzvah* of preserving God's

world —"To work it and guard it" (Gen. 2:15), or through vegetarianism, which he calls "a *kashrut* for our age, "follow from *the All* as ways of "speaking God's name." Images of God's immanence in the world—as accessible to us as looking in the mirror, or in another's face, or as speaking a loved one's name—seem quite apt for an age that no longer finds plausible the image of a supernatural God "up there" in heaven ruling over "His" world.

While Green's theology is consistently and fruitfully in dialogue with the voices of classical Jewish sources, especially kabbalah and hasidism, conspicuously absent are the voices of Jewish women. Green makes only a few asides to some of the issues raised by contemporary Jewish feminists: Judaism's hierarchical and male-dominated parental and royal metaphors for God, the problematic roles of women in the Torah, and an "excursus" on God as male and female.<sup>4</sup> Nor will all of Green's readers find satisfying that he privileges the heterosexual relationship as the metaphor for love of God. Because Green focuses so much on the Jewish symbols and metaphors that have personal meaning for him,<sup>5</sup> he has a tendency to overlook the social consequences his preferred metaphors have had and continue to have for at least half the community of Jews.<sup>6</sup>

A strong point of Green's theology is its coherence. I have already mentioned how nicely Green's root-metaphors of the world as God's Name makes a Jewish view of the

world and a Jewish way of life fit together. Green further reinforces the sense of coherence his theology provides with the overall structure of the book itself. He divides the book into four parts, each an exposition of the letters of God's name, *Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh*. Each letter symbolizes a fuller, more concrete manifestation of God in the world (as per kabbalistic doctrine), so we move from the most ineffable, inaccessible aspects of God's existence to the most tangible expressions of God's immanence in our world.

Finally, Green's theological perspective is fundamentally hopeful, redemptive. He says, "Our tradition...calls upon us to go on seeing God—the One we know to be *Y-H-V-H*, embracing all of being—as 'other,' *in order that the human mind might go on being sane and human.*"<sup>7</sup> Green does not deny that the horrors of this century give us every reason to think otherwise. Rather, in response to our experiences of the "hiding of God's Face," Green says:

[w]e don't deny absurdity, but we reject it, we *defy* it...The absence of God and the rule of darkness certainly represent a truth, one we do not deny. But we know a deeper truth.<sup>8</sup>

Green does not put the presence of evil in the world at the center of his theology, as does Blumenthal in his theology of an "abusing God." Rather, Green suggests, as the kabbalists did before him, that evil is an essential aspect of reality, of God's self, but that aspect of reality is not the face of God

we ultimately seek, not the name of the God we long to speak.

### *Facing the Abusing God*

I had mixed and extremely strong emotional reactions to David Blumenthal's *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest*. Sometimes I could not stand it; sometimes I thought it exemplified everything I hoped a Jewish theology could and should do. The ambition, comprehensiveness, and sincerity of Blumenthal's Jewish theological project is impressive: to find a Jewish voice in Jewish forms to articulate a modern, unsugar-coated Jewish experience of God that takes into account the immensity of human suffering in this century.<sup>9</sup>

The disruptive, many-voiced structure of the book itself is part of his argument. The scope and comprehensiveness of Blumenthal's theology, its inclusion of so many different voices is almost overwhelming: holocaust survivors, Wendy Farley—a Protestant systematic theologian, Diane—a Jewish adult survivor of abuse, Beth—a rape victim, traditional Jewish commentators, Blumenthal's modern critical biblical and Judaic studies teachers, four powerful psalms of protest, new Yom Kippur liturgies that acknowledge God's sins as well as our own. But *these* are the voices of the diverse communities past and present among which the modern Jew in search of God finds her/himself.

To some it will seem arrogant that Blumenthal, himself not an adult survivor of abuse, uses other people's real experiences of abuse as a metaphor for

his own problem with God. His choice may seem both trendy and unjust to the survivors of abuse, who, unlike him, really were traumatized by their experiences of abuse. A printed exchange of letters with Diane, an adult survivor of abuse, confirmed my suspicions. Diane criticizes Blumenthal for not speaking from the experience of real abuse, and Blumenthal admits the problem.<sup>10</sup> But it is typical of Blumenthal's book to have anticipated objections and to allow them to be voiced—indeed, to make them an integral part of the dialogue at the heart of this book.

### **In Dialogue with the Contemporary**

*Facing the Abusing God* fits some of my theological criteria quite well. Blumenthal roots our modern relationship to God in two powerful metaphors: God the abusive parent, and God-talk as a kind of psychotherapeutic catharsis. If God is like an abusive parent—an image not unlike those found in some traditional Jewish texts—then admitting the hurt that God caused us and confronting God with our pain turns theology into a sort of sacred psychotherapy. Blumenthal's metaphor compares Jewish theology to the strategies of adult survivors of abuse for coping with betrayal by a loved one. These metaphors resonate well not only with traditional Jewish arguments with God (Job, the Psalms of protest, Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev), but also, as Blumenthal points out, with contemporary faith in the modern myths of psychotherapy.<sup>11</sup>

Blumenthal's theology is quite responsive to many voices of modern Jewish experience. Blumenthal constantly confronts the social implications of his theology through dialogues with others. The sheer number of voices gives an illusion of inclusiveness, as if every relevant Jewish and non-Jewish voice were heard. But there are also some conspicuous absences. Unlike Green, whose view of Judaism is holistic, including all of life in its purview, Blumenthal ignores the *halakhah* as a mode of Jewish expression. He shows a bias for talk over action, and for prayer in particular as *the* distinctive mode of Jewish expression—biblical prayer (psalms), the prayers of contemporary victims, Blumenthal's new *Avinu Malkenu* and *Tahanun*. Of course prayer has been and continues to be a means of protesting an abusing God. But could not a life devoted to mitzvot also be a means of protest for some? Asking this question would have broadened Blumenthal's reach into the reality of Judaism as it is lived.

Blumenthal's theology also does not provide the believer with a sense of coherence. He might protest that that is exactly his point. In a world where God is an abuser, how dare one seek order? But Blumenthal's intentionally jarring, fragmented picture of God comes as much from a deconstructionist aesthetic of complexity, as it does from the problem of theodicy. Like deconstructionists, he delights in the difficult, the unresolved. When Blumenthal uses the format of "the grouped textual field" to comment on

the psalms, I am sure that he was influenced as much by Derrida's precedent as he was by *migra'ot gedolot* or the Talmud. By stressing the dissonance of the surrounding commentary with the biblical verses—he entitles one block of commentary text "*Con-verses*"—Blumenthal's use of the traditional Jewish format leads to a feeling of fragmentation, rather than of coherence. His Torah does not guide one to the unity behind the fragmented world, as Green's Torah does.

Thus, my greatest difficulty with the theology of *Facing the Abusing God* is that it is not redemptive. It does not seem to promise that knowledge of God, or a relationship with God is going to make my life any better. If one accepts the psychotherapeutic metaphor underlying this theology, I suppose the catharsis of naming the abusing God and confronting Him with his damage could bring relief. In that sense, it might be redemptive. But this metaphor does not work for me personally. The myth of an abusive God seems true to Jewish experience, but it is an unattractive myth. I don't object so much to Blumenthal's metaphor of the abusive God, as to his making it the centerpiece of his theology. For if that's all God is, why bother attempting to maintain a relationship? I need a God with more redeeming qualities.

## The Spirit of Renewal

Edward Feld's *Spirit of Renewal: Crisis and Response in Jewish Life* presents a much more accessible, and

ultimately more redemptive theological response to the problem of theodicy than does Blumenthal's work. Feld's theology focuses on the general human problem, as well as the particularly Jewish problem: why do we suffer? He surveys different Jewish theological responses to the major Jewish catastrophes: biblical responses to exile and the destruction of the First Temple, rabbinic responses to the destruction of the Second Temple and the failure of the Bar Kokhba rebellion, and the modern Jewish responses of victims to the Holocaust.

The strongest part of Feld's book is his graphic, passionate description and analysis of strategies of Jewish survival during the Holocaust, from which he derives a normative Jewish ethic: "ethical survivalism."<sup>12</sup> Ethical survivalism, according to Feld, seeks "to balance amidst the extreme conditions of being reduced to something less than human, both the demands of the self and the care of the other, the need to preserve a moral life."<sup>13</sup> Survivors such as the nurse who put up with the horrors of working in Mengele's laboratory in order to get the extra rations available there, so that others might survive, embodied this ethic.

Feld's account of earlier Jewish responses to suffering sets up the Holocaust as a watershed. Earlier Biblical and rabbinic theodicies of "the suffering of Job," Isaiah's "suffering servant," *midah keneged midah*, redemptive martyrdom, Torah study rather than history as the locus of salvation—all these might have worked

in their time. But the immensity of the Nazi destruction of Jews, and the means of its implementation—the "excremental assault" on the humanity of its victims, make all previous Jewish theological assessments of suffering completely inadequate.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Feld's chronological presentation of Jewish responses to suffering up to the Holocaust makes the ethical survivalism of modern Jewish victims of the Holocaust a *continuation* of the long line of classical Jewish theological responses to catastrophe.<sup>15</sup>

Of the three theologies, Feld's mythic language about God is the least compelling. Feld's image of God as spirit—"the spirit of renewal"—is perhaps too conventional. It is not as rich in implications as Green's "world as God's Name," nor as provocative as Blumenthal's "God the Abuser." Apart from his mythic understanding of God's immanence in the redemptive acts of people (a point to which I will return shortly), Feld's myths are mostly myths of Jewish history, rather than metaphors of God.

While Feld does not directly address the issue of women in Judaism at any length, the voices and stories of holocaust survivors he cites include both female and male voices. Moreover, the structure of his book puts holocaust survivors' oral histories side by side with exemplary tales of the rabbis, as if all were equally authentic voices of Jewish experience. While drawing upon the voices of biblical and rabbinic sources, Feld does not privilege them. Indeed, the riveting testimony of the modern Jewish sur-

vivors often comes off as even more authentic than the now inadequate traditional voices. Because Feld focuses on the history of Jewish responses to suffering, his theology will appeal to Jews who feel a historical connection to the fate of the Jewish people—if not a commitment to Jewish observance, prayer, or personal God. This theology will work for a Jewish agnostic.

Feld's theology also meets our criterion of coherence and order. The story of the ever recurring cycle of "crisis and response in Jewish life" *itself* provides coherence, meaning, a common redemptive strand through Jewish history, even during the holocaust. "The awareness of the eternity of the battle between *the sacred* and *the chaos* that always seeks to overwhelm us is *the story* that the Jew now tells."<sup>16</sup> And without denying the human capacity for inflicting evil upon one another, Feld insists that redemption is possible.

### Redemption after Auschwitz

Feld's insistence that redemption is possible, that redemption occurs in the everyday ways that human beings overcome their limitations by reaching out to others, and that God is manifest in those little actions—is the strongest, most compelling aspect of his theology.

We...believe in two distinct realms, but East of Eden they are terribly mixed together. After the Holocaust we realize that the divine does not stand transcendently triumphant, overseeing the events below, but that God is found in the midst

of the muck of this world and that the workings of the divine are fragile creations. The chaos surrounding us always has the ability to overwhelm the life that manifests spirituality. The sacred must continuously be sustained, must always be protected; neglected it has no chance of being. Sacred acts are vulnerable and hidden ones, easily lost. But the reality of holiness is as true as our knowledge of evil.

God is at the center of our life, at the very heart of existence. The encounter with God has the power to create a place where evil no longer has dominion....According to rabbinic legend, Elijah is to be found waiting outside the gates of Rome, wrapping bandages around the wounded poor. We imitate Elijah's messianic calling by offering our seat on the bus for a bent gentleman, helping a woman move a stroller up the stairs, sending a foreign visitor off in the right direction, running after a someone to return a purse left behind at the cash register, listening to the sound of a bird when the rain stops, petitioning for the release of a political prisoner, talking to a homeless person, helping a family victimized by war to resettle, responding to the pain of a woman whose husband is jailed, noticing the first pale buds of spring.<sup>17</sup>

“God” is the name of this fragile quality of holiness, order, and redemption nearly overwhelmed in the “muck of the world.” Feld recognizes how much we need to experience some sense of redemption, and eloquently articulates the places we modern, secularized people—traumatized by the Holocaust and other twentieth-century acts of inhumanity—can plausibly find it.

### What does Theology Do?

Arthur Green, David Blumenthal, and Edward Feld base their theologies on metaphors for God: the world as God’s Name (Green); God as “Abuser” (Blumenthal); or God as a “spirit of renewal,” a “fragile light of the spirit that is always threatened by the power of night” (Feld).<sup>18</sup> All three contemporary theologies stand or fall on the power of their metaphors for God to move people. And these three contemporary Jewish theologies insist that God-talk is not “just talk;” it is doing something important. For Green, God-talk is nothing less than creation. You continue the act of creation by speaking God’s name in the world. For Blumenthal, God-talk is psychotherapeutic healing; it is cathartic and freeing to speak, to name, and confront the Abusing God. And for Feld, God-talk is the language of an “ongoing community and tradition of argument.”<sup>19</sup> The words of Torah are no longer our ends for salvation, but rather a means—a “vocabulary that the tradition offers us for self-knowledge” and an “open-ended argument regarding what we must do.”<sup>20</sup>

But are all these contemporary examples of God-talk really dialogues with *something beyond* us? Blumenthal’s theology seems too self-expressive to be that. When the survivor of abuse confronts his or her abuser, does s/he really expect to engage the abuser in conversation, or, rather, to release decades of bottled-up, hitherto unexpressed anger and hurt? By contrast, Green and Feld let the God-talk be a real dialogue with an Other whom we seek to know.

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1. See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1990), 26-27.
  2. Green, xvii., and 35, for an explicit reference to the image of a “mirror.”
  3. Green, 235.
  4. Green, 37-42, 164.
  5. Green, xvii-xix.
  6. See Judith Plaskow, “The Right Question is Theological,” in Susannah Heschel, ed., *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader* (New York: Schocken, 1983), 122; and *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 21-24.
  7. Green, 27.
  8. Green, 157.
  9. Blumenthal, xviii.
  10. Blumenthal, 195-196.
  11. See Blumenthal, 12-14, for the relevance of psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytical concepts for a theology of God’s “personality.”
  12. Feld, 145.
  13. Feld, 145.
  14. Feld, 90, 95-106 (esp., 98-9).
  15. Feld, 165.
  16. Feld, 147 (my emphases).
  17. Feld, 142-43.
  18. Feld, 143.
  19. Feld, 162.
  20. Feld, 166-67.