

# GOD!

*Arthur Green\**

A classical tool of theology is the *via negativa*, a way of learning religious truth by asking what it is that we can *not* assert about God. Here I wish to apply this method to the impossibility of the task before us: we cannot summarise the entire history of Jewish reflections on God – from the Bible, as modified by the early rabbis, through the complex refinements of philosophy and mysticism, on to the homiletic insights of Hasidic and other preachers, and down through the crisis of faith in modern times – in the space of a few pages. To do so would be to insult the topic. This essay will therefore be quite selective and will reflect a somewhat personal bias, although it is based on a reading of classical Jewish sources.

I begin with a theological assertion. As a religious person, I believe that the evolution of species is the greatest sacred drama of all time. It dwarfs all the other religious stories, pictures and images that so preoccupy the mind of religious traditions, including our own. This evolution, from the simplest life-forms millions of years ago to the great complexity of the human brain, still now only barely understood, is a *purposeful* process. There is a One within and behind the great diversity of life that seeks to be discovered, that has aimed all along, however imperfectly and stumblingly, to bring about the emergence of a mind that can know it, articulate it, and strive toward the moral greatness that will fulfil its purpose. I prefer to think of that One in immanent terms, a Being or life-force that dwells *within* the universe and resides in all its forms, rather than a Creator from beyond who forms a world that is ‘other’ and separate from its own Self. This One lies within and behind all the diverse forms of being that have existed since the beginning of time; it is the single Being (as the name Y-H-W-H indicates)<sup>1</sup> clothed in each individual being and encompassing them all.

Because we humans represent a significant step forward (though I by no means claim that we are the final or ultimate step, surely not as we are now) in the evolutionary path toward the self-articulation and self-

---

\* Rabbi Dr Arthur Green is a leading authority on Jewish spirituality and Jewish thought. He is rector of Hebrew College’s transdenominational rabbinic programme. He also holds the title visiting professor of Jewish mysticism at Hebrew College and is the Philip W Lown professor of Jewish thought at Brandeis University.

fulfilment of that One, the One calls out to us in a particular way. It addresses each of us humans with something more than the cry 'Survive!' that is its instinct-borne call to every creature. We children of Adam (that's how you say 'human' in Hebrew) are addressed with the word the God of Genesis used to call out to the first humans: *Ayekah?* 'Where are you?'<sup>2</sup> This question means 'Where are you in helping Me to carry this project forward?' Are you extending My work of self-manifestation, participating as you should in the ongoing evolutionary process, the eternal reaching toward the One that is all of life's goal?

'Where are you?' calls out to us in three distinct dimensions. Are you stretching the human mind to move forward, to carry on the evolutionary process as we think in ever more sophisticated and refined ways about the nature of existence and its unity? Evolution does not end with the emergence of humanity. The process continues unabated, reflected in the growth of societies and civilisations over the millennia. The highest manifestation of this ongoing evolution is to be found in our ideas of God, as images and conceptions move from primitive tribal gods and local nature deities through classical polytheism (the 'pantheon' of gods), on to primitive monotheism and then toward greater abstraction and depth of thought. In our own day this process takes place both in the scientific community, in the search for a contemporary understanding of the life-force or a unified field theory and in the growing interest in monistic philosophies, including those rooted in Vedanta or Buddhism, that have begun to take root in the post-modern West.

The second way in which this 'Where are you?' calls out to us involves the stretching the human heart to become more open, more aware. If you believe as I do that the presence of God is everywhere, our chief task is that of becoming aware. But that job is not only an intellectual one; it involves heart as well as mind. God is everywhere, but we build walls around ourselves, emotional walls, barricades of defensiveness, because we are too threatened by the oneness of Being to let ourselves be open to it. 'Where are you?' demands of us a greater openness to our own vulnerability and dependence on forces beyond ourselves than our frail ego is willing to accept. The walls behind which we barricade ourselves are the illusions of our strength and immortality, the sense that there is nothing more important than our own egos and the superficial pursuits toward which most of our lives have somehow become devoted. Liberation into the life of the spirit means doing the hard work of breaking through those self-created protections and coming face to face with the ultimate question of our lives. Only then do we begin to let go of that which separates us from the totality of being or the all-embracing presence of the One.

The third area in which ‘Where are you?’ calls upon us to stretch ourselves is that of the human deed. It is not enough to reach forth with mind and heart; these alone will not transform the world. *Every* human being is the image of God. *Every* creature and life-form is a garbing of divine presence. The way in which we treat them and relate to them is the only true testing-ground of our own religious consciousness. The One seeks to be known and loved in each of its endless manifestations. The purpose of our growing awareness is to reach out and appreciate all things for what they really are. This is especially true with regard to our fellow humans. We need to help all humans to discover the image of God within themselves; this is Judaism’s most basic moral truth. We recognise that this truth may be depicted differently in the varied religious languages of human culture. We do not require others to accept the language of Judaism, but we do see justice, decency, and civility to one another as universal human imperatives. A person cannot be expected to discover the image of God within himself as long as he is hungry, or as long as she is homeless or degraded by poverty, addictions, or the seemingly overwhelming burdens of everyday life. Our task has to be to lessen and lighten those burdens as ways of helping all to see the radiant presence that surrounds us in each moment. In the realm of ‘heart’ it was illusory walls we had to remove in order to see that light. But in the realm of ‘deed’ the forces that block out the light are quite concrete, and they too have to become the object of our attention.

The perceptive reader may by now have understood that I am commenting here on the opening teaching of Pirkey Avot, the sayings of the Talmudic masters: ‘The world stands upon three things: on Torah (eternal wisdom, the cultivation of awareness), on Worship (*Avodah*, the struggle to open the heart), and on deeds of kindness.’ If you have read me this way, you’re beginning to discern my Midrashic method.

Thus when I read the old rabbinic dicta that say ‘God looked at the righteous’ or ‘Israel arose in God’s mind’ and ‘for their sake God created the world’, I surprisingly find myself to be among the affirmers. Of course I don’t read these words thinking of a Roman emperor or a Near Eastern potentate who calls in his advisers and asks ‘Should I create humans?’ But I do agree that there is a purpose to existence, and that is what these statements really mean. Reading them for our day we understand that ‘Israel’ is too narrow and potentially chauvinistic a term in this context and even that ‘the righteous’ sounds rather smug and elitist. I by no means think that God created world for the sake of the Jews or anything like that. I need to universalise the ‘Israel’ of this sentence (and many others!) to include all those who struggle with God, referring back to the original

etymology of that name. ‘The righteous’ here has to include all those who do the work of stretching toward the One that we have just described, by whatever means and methods they employ. I affirm this universalising of the rabbis’ teaching to be in accord with the truth that lies at Judaism’s core, rooted in the assertion that all humans are descended from the same parents, those of whom God says: ‘Let us make humans in our image.’ The reality of that One is manifest across the great and diverse spectrum of our shared humanity.

As I have said, within the few millennia that we call human history, the tiny tip of evolution’s time line that we can reconstruct from the remains of human civilisation, the evolutionary process continues unabated, as ideas, images, and conceptions of the gods or God or the life-force grow and change with the times. This evolutionary approach to the history of religion will form the background for my treatment here of Jewish views on the subject of God, which I seek to address in the combined roles of scholar/historian and contemporary believer/struggler/theologian.

Our particular religious history begins in the Ancient Near East, among peoples who worshipped sky gods, deities who dwelt first within and later beyond the heavens and who were manifest in lofty mountains and mighty storms. Our ancestors celebrated the ancient memory of these gods’ defeat of the netherworld gods, dwellers in the darkness and the deep. They saw the very creation of the world as the result of this terrible primal battle. While traces of this tale are still to be found scattered through our Holy Scriptures, the authors of the grand opening chapter of our Torah sought to go beyond it: here the single God created everything alone, willfully, and with abundant blessing. As multiplicity began to emerge in all those pairs – day and night, light and darkness, land and sea, male and female – they came forth harmoniously, each having its proper and God-intended place.

But the pre-Israelite polytheistic legacy, hidden as it was behind the harmonising face of Genesis, could not be entirely set aside. Transformations of culture are never sudden or complete; aspects of old beliefs and fears are retained as the ‘shadow’ side of seemingly new and different ways of thinking. I want to point out certain elements of that ancient Near Eastern legacy that have abided with us over the several millennia since the monotheistic revolution. First among these is the vertical metaphor: the sense that God stands (or sits, in fact) *above* us. In the Biblical period, God was seen to dwell in a palace on the far side of the upper waters that lay on the other side of the sky. The rabbis and the earliest Jewish mystics saw Him as residing in the ‘seventh heaven’. Rabbinic teachings depicted Moses, as well as his latter-day successor Rabbi Akiva, rising through the clouds and holding onto God’s Throne of

Glory so that they not be pushed back to earth by those fiery angels who opposed man's ascent to a realm beyond his natural place.

As far as we think we have travelled from those ancient beliefs, a certain attachment to the vertical metaphor in theology has never quite departed from our midst. As children we still think of God being 'up there', of 'heaven' as somewhere beyond the sky. Even if we as adults see ourselves to have outgrown such childish conceptions, we will still think of ourselves seeking to reach a 'higher spiritual level', or indeed, in more casual moments, to 'get high' by exulting in God. All of these are part of the legacy of the vertical metaphor.

In fact there has been some competition over the course of 2,500 years between this vertical language for understanding the divine/human relationship and another root metaphor, that which sees God to be found *within* reality and especially within the human heart, rather than above us in the heavens. The earliest direct statement of this competition is found in the Torah itself, when Moses, in his final speeches to the Israelites, proclaims:

The word I command you this day is not too wondrous for you and is not far off. It is not in heaven, as though to say 'Who will go up to the heavens to fetch it and bring it to us?' Nor is it over the sea ... But it is very close to you, within your own mouths and hearts to be fulfilled. (Deut. 30:11-13)

One could imagine this text as a counterpoint to the Torah's own great story of Moses going up the mountain and receiving the word from God in heaven. Here we are being told not to take that tale too literally, to understand it rather as *a vertical metaphor for an internal event*. The true Torah already dwells within you.

The first truly important post-Biblical Jewish religious thinker, Philo of Alexandria, was a great champion of the internalisation of Scripture as he created a Judaism transposed into a Platonic setting. Philo was the first of many who saw the detailed descriptions of the tabernacle in the Book of Exodus as metaphorically referring to an inner sanctum, to a 'place' for God that we fashion within the human heart. 'Let them make me a sanctuary,' as later interpreters read the verse, 'so that I may dwell *within* them.' (Ex. 25:8)

My own favourite setting for the face-off between the vertical and internal root-metaphors within Judaism is a certain page of the Babylonian Talmud. The second chapter of the Tractate Hagigah (14b) tells the famous story of Rabbi Akiva and his friends, the four who entered the *pardes*, or the 'orchard' of mystical experience. To understand the nature of this experience we turn to Rashi, the 11th-century French

commentator who is usually our best guide to what the Talmud text means. On 'four entered the orchard', Rashi says: 'They ascended to the sky by use of a [divine] name.' For Rashi, the vertical picture of the universe is alive and well, taken quite literally in a somewhat magical context. There are powerful divine names which, when used within proper bounds, can transport one up to heaven. But if we are unhappy with Rashi's reading, we turn to another corner of the Talmudic page, where his contemporary, Rabbi Hananel ben Hushiel of Kairouan in North Africa, tells us that there really was no heavenly journey at all. The event is an internal one, he says: 'They were gazing into the chambers of their own hearts.' In those days, the North African Jews were more intellectually sophisticated than the Ashkenazim, having come into earlier contact with the Greco-Islamic philosophical traditions.

Another aspect of the ancient Near Eastern legacy that abides with us has to do with the incomplete vanquishing of the primordial forces of chaos. Yes, God is all-powerful and is the single Author of creation. Yet the world remains imperfect; reality as we encounter it, filled with seeming arbitrariness and random suffering, cannot possibly represent life as a perfect God intended it. Western religions have invested great intellectual efforts at solving this problem of theodicy ('Why do the righteous suffer?'), not a few of them directed toward either blaming the victims (as do Job's 'comforters') or promising vindication in the World to Come. But some of the more profound and deeply felt responses to human suffering turn back to the images of pre-mundane forces that elude the control of God. Gnosticism and Kabbalah both have recourse to this myth of an incomplete conquest of evil that underlies creation. The opposing forces were not destroyed, but only set aside by the imposition of creation's order. Stirred to life by the waywardness of human passions, the cosmic powers that opposed the emergence of the universe are now dressed in the garb of moral evil and lead the wicked into rebellion against the rule of God. Monotheism in a moralising context can thus never quite escape its own dualistic shadow; insofar as the enemy of God and rectitude is real and powerful, it will be expressed by some demonic manifestation that is more-or-less a version of the ancient tale of the incomplete vanquishing of chaos or darkness.

The complexity of the divine personality as reflected in our sources also belongs to the legacy of the Biblical struggle to both combat and subsume the polytheistic universe that preceded it. In a world of many gods, specialisation of function can be rather clearly delineated and the conduct of a particular deity more or less predicted. It is no surprise that the god of war will act in an aggressive and warlike manner, that love-gods seek to lead us into love, or that gods and goddesses of the crops overflow

with bounty. Rain gods have to be appeased in their proper season and gods of fertility must be given their due so that both human and animal wombs be opened. You have your tribal gods and I have mine, but the traveller venturing beyond his own people's territory is well-advised to make some offering to the power that rules the land he is about to enter.

The monotheistic revolution means that all these deities, along with their many functions and personae, are absorbed into a single Being, one God who has to represent them all. Y-H-W-H comes to be seen as the God who rules Assyria and Babylonia as well as Israel. He is the One who brings the rain and blesses the flocks; He is at once master of birth and death, of war and peace, of compassion and punishment, affliction and healing. How can one God manage so many emotions and act in so many different ways? God is a King with ten garments, according to an early Hebrew poem embedded in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy. 'Which one shall I wear today?' He is constantly asking Himself. Will it be the white of forgiveness or the blood-red of vengeance? Shall I put on my *kova' yeshu'ah*, the 'helmet of salvation?' Should I sit on the judgment-seat or the mercy-seat? The conflicts between the gods of old have become the internal conflicts of the single deity, forcing a complexity in the divine personality not required by the earlier formulations.

This new situation created by monotheism is given subtle but dramatic expression in the generic Hebrew term for 'God', *elohim*. As any who knows even a bit of Hebrew will recognise that *elohim* is a plural form; its primary meaning is 'gods'. There is a singular, *eloha*, but this form is almost never used in the Bible. When speaking about non-Israelite (or 'false') deities, the term is treated like a full plural, requiring the use of plural verbs and adjectives, as in *elohim aherim* (Ex. 20:3), 'other gods'. But when *elohim* is applied to the God of Israel, it is treated as though singular, as in *bereshit bara* (and not *bare'u*) *elohim*, 'In the beginning God created ...' Elohim here is a collective form (not entirely unlike *pan-theon*, by the way!), meaning that all the multiple and diverse powers of godhood are now concentrated within this single entity. The process of monotheistic transformation – with all its difficulty – is borne in the very language.

What we are seeing here, the cultural historian might claim, is a totemic representation of the increasing complexity of human personality. People who live complex and often conflicted lives need to imagine a deity who somehow reflects them, who bears within Himself the painful choices faced by humans on a daily basis. The rabbis tended to schematise the divine personality into a two-fold model: the 'Aspect of Mercy' and the 'Aspect of Justice' together comprised the divine self, and God, in



*God!*

response to the actions of humanity, was constantly wavering between the two. It is not hard, however, to see in this depiction the situation of the rabbis themselves. As leaders, they loved their people and wished to ease their burdens, especially to reassure them, in the face of historical tragedy, of God's unabated love. But at the same time the rabbis were judges, upholders of the Law and administrators of its authority. As such they had to be bearers of an 'aspect of justice' that surely brought them into tension with their desire to offer compassion and forgiveness, precisely the lens of conflict through which they saw God.

Here we necessarily open ourselves to a broader question. To what extent, we must ask, are not all our human-like images of God projections from the realm of human experience? The inevitable answer is that they indeed are, and the theologian does best who admits fully that such is the case. Of course the person of faith is tempted to turn the picture around, suggesting that the complexity of human personality simply reflects our own creation in God's image, and that it is God, rather than humans, who is to be seen as the primary figure of this similitude. The hall of mirrors may indeed be approached from either end, as the mystics understand so well. But the ancient rabbis already seem to have admitted that our images of God change according to the needs of the hour. When God appeared to Israel at the Sea, they said, as the people confronted the advancing Egyptian armies, 'He appeared to them as a youth.' On the day of battle one has no use for a tottering old God. But at Sinai, in giving the Law, 'He appeared as an elder.' Who wants to receive laws from a mere youth of a God? On the day of lawgiving, only an elder would do.<sup>3</sup> The word 'appeared' (*nire'ah*) in this Midrash of perhaps the third to fifth century, is a passive form, and it is not entirely clear whether the text means that God willfully changed His appearance in accord with the people's needs or whether they just saw Him that way, reflected in the lens of their own desires.

The evolving images of God in the passage from the Bible to the rabbinic corpus surely reflect both the history of Israel and some broader themes in the development of civilisation. The tribal God has become more consistently the universal Creator, although His special love for Israel is something the rabbis need constantly to reiterate. This was an especially important message in the face of Jewish historical defeat and the constant pressures of triumphant Christianity's supersessionist theology, insisting that history had proven how wrong the Jews were in not accepting Christ. The election of Israel thus remains a cornerstone of Jewish theology, even as the old tribal deity evolves toward greater universalism. The fierce God of Israel's wanderings who demanded that they slay every man, woman, and child of their foes is now increasingly



transformed into the loving Father of all His creatures. Although still described almost exclusively in male language, the rabbis' God is, in admittedly stereotypic terms, a rather 'feminised' male, bearer of *rahamim*, womb-like compassion, unflinching nurturer, lover of peace. He is best worshipped by those who 'dwell in tents', here converted to 'synagogues and houses of study', rather than by those who go forth in conquest, be it military or adventurous. As the Jews were transformed from nomads and warriors into town-dwellers and increasingly 'people of the book', their God too became one chiefly encountered in the study of Torah, 'the best of all goods'. He is a God who longs for His wayward children to return to Him, who knows how to mourn with them in their sorrows, both personal and collective, and who smiles at the thought that they have bested Him in their devotion to the Law.

Modern Zionism, emerging from what it saw as a long cocoon-like sleep in the world of Jewish disempowerment, rebelled on the theological plane as well. The return to the land and the longing for renewed Jewish hegemony brought many to despise the Judaism of diaspora experience and to long again for the Biblical age of heroes and their warrior God. The neo-pagan Hebrew poet Shaul Tchernichowsky (1875–1943) spoke of how the Jews had taken their wild desert God and 'tied Him up in tefillin-straps'. Indeed the rabbinic tradition did create a significantly more civilised or domesticated image of God. He was ever becoming a deity more appropriate to the Jews and the civilisation they had created. The evolution of God in this direction may also be viewed as a progressive taming of human and perhaps especially male violence in the course of advancing civilisation. The de-legitimisation of anger and its expression is a well-known tendency of Jewish ethical literature. Compassion, understanding, and self-control are among the virtues extolled by traditional Jewish ethicists, while anger, hatred, and vengeance – despite the obvious Biblical verses that could be adduced to legitimate them – were deeply frowned upon as improper ways of feeling or acting. Corresponding to this shift in the norms of human behaviour, the Biblical God who had just abrogated human sacrifices in the tale of Abraham and Isaac but who still commanded death by stoning and burning for those who transgressed His Law now became a God who abhors all bloodshed, who proclaims that taking even a single human life is like destroying the entire world. Even publicly shaming another person so that the blood rises to his cheeks is said to be tantamount to the ultimately horrid act of bloodshed. This ongoing totemic civilising of the deity, ever an unfinished process, in fact becomes ethically more urgent in an era when Jewry has returned to the stage of history and power politics. Tchernichowsky's

complaint reflects awareness of this process, and the re-assertion of the Bible to a place of primacy over the rabbinic tradition was a well-known feature of the early years of Israeli statehood. But it cannot be allowed to carry the day.

Another modern Hebrew poet raised a different sort of objection to Jewish theology, one that seems to strike at the deepest roots of monotheism itself. David Frishmann (1859–1922) in his poem *Elilim* ('Idols') invokes the well-known Midrashic story about Abraham in the workshop of his father Terah the idol-maker. Left alone to guard the shop, Abraham smashes every idol but the largest, placing an axe in that remaining idol's hand. His father returns and is terribly distressed to see the destruction. 'What happened to my business?' he cries out to his son. 'The large idol got angry,' replies Abraham, 'and destroyed all the others.' 'Don't be silly,' says Terah, 'that idol is just made of wood.' 'Aha!' says Abraham. That 'Aha' is the moment of the monotheistic revolution.

Frishmann retells the tale, but then cleverly suggests that the Midrashic story is precisely a true reflection of what the Israelites did. They destroyed all the idols but the biggest, whom they named their own God, and then went on to claim that it was He who had vanquished all the others. Frishmann gives us a Jewish version of what today is often seen as the Buddhist critique of Western religion. We have destroyed all the idols but one, it is claimed. Only by denying 'God', the object of our fantasy and imagination, will we be able to confront true reality, the presence of divinity in each place and moment of existence. Of course David Frishmann is not quite a Buddhist, but his incisive reading of the tale from an atheist's viewpoint requires comment. Is there anything truly different about monotheism? Have we merely reduced all the gods to one, as we noted in interpreting the term *elohim*, but essentially changed nothing other than their number?

Monotheism does make a difference. The one God is all alone. This means that God has no one with whom to be a partner, until he creates and allows Himself to love humans. The old pagan deities all had divine consorts. Marriages, love affairs, and romantic intrigues were common among the gods and goddesses of the Near East as well as those of Greece and Rome. Monotheism means an essential change to the erotic situation of God, who is left without a partner. God has no one to love except *you*. You, faithful servant or beloved child; you, Israel or, in the Christian adaptation, you, the Church or the Christian.

It is because of this new need of God for a human partner in love that the Song of Songs may be saved for Scripture and described by Rabbi Akiva as the 'holy of holies' among the sacred books. It is largely through this Song

that the erotic metaphor of divine/human relationship enters the Western canon. The beloved people, the Church, or the soul is seen as God's chosen bride; it is He who knocks on the door of the beloved's heart, who peers through the lattice-work to catch a glimpse of her, and all the rest. This reading of the Song of Songs as the key to God's love for humans derives from the loneliness of God wrought by monotheism. In Genesis, God looks at Adam and says: 'It is not good for man to be alone; I will make him a help-meet to be before him' (Gen 2:18). How does God know that it is hard to be alone? Because He has already experienced loneliness.

Everything created in the opening chapter of Genesis comes forth as member of a pair: day and night, light and darkness, upper waters and lower waters, land and sea, sun and moon, fish and birds, man and woman. Creation is also a tale of the emergence of duality. Everything is paired – except God. To say it in fanciful Jewish language, we would suggest that this is why the Torah begins with the letter *bet*, indicating the number two. The *aleph* is reserved for the single and singular Self of God, revealed only at Sinai in the first letter of the opening word *anokhi*, 'I am.'

The absence of a pantheon of gods in the Bible, and especially the lack of a divine consort, led scholars of a generation ago to speak of Biblical religion as being without myth, a purely this-worldly faith that created linear history precisely as a counterpoint to the rejected worldview of mythology. Today, we think about myth in somewhat broader terms, and it is possible indeed to speak of Biblical religion as containing mythic elements. The sacred history of Israel takes on mythical dimensions, especially as it is celebrated and re-created in an annual ritual cycle.

Nevertheless, I believe there is something distinctive about the God of Biblical and Jewish myth. Its story is all about God's encounter with humans, from His admission of failure on seeing the misconduct of the early generations, through the flood, the covenant with Abraham, whom He loves so greatly, and on through the patriarchal generations. God sees the suffering of Israel in Egypt and 'knows' (Ex. 2:25), as though He too had taken part in their bondage. God comes down from the heights to learn what it means to enter into relationship with humans. He accepts the arguing of His beloved Abraham for the lives of the Sodomites, He backs off on his angry intent to destroy Israel when Moses stands up for them, and He remains faithful to His promise even through long periods when Israel seems undeserving of His love. In having to deal with mortals as His only love-partners, God learns what it is to be the parent of a wayward child, even the husband of an unfaithful wife. A deity who had other outlets for relationship might well have given up on humans. Only One who is otherwise quite totally and intolerably alone can be counted on to

remain engaged in the enterprise of divine/human intimacy forever, no matter how hard it gets. Thus it happens that *relationship*, modelled on multiple forms of human interpersonal intimacy, becomes the fundamental truth of Jewish and Western religious life.

This vision of the close, even if often difficult, relationship between God and humans is related to that which we have already named as Judaism's most basic moral insight: the insistence that each human being is the image of God. The notion of divine image has been treated quite abstractly by most Jewish interpreters: it has been referred to intelligence, free choice, moral responsibility and a host of other goodly virtues. But at its core there is something quite *visual* about this term; its first meaning may well be that we humans somehow look like God. When God looks at us humans, He sees something of Himself in us, in a way not quite true of other creatures, all of which are God's handiwork. And when we look at God, as we are called to do in the course of this mutual relationship, we too discover something familiar, the very root of our own self. As the mystics have always known, the return to ourselves and the return to God is a single voyage.

But the story does not stop here. We have to go back to the internal metaphor and trace a bit more of its evolution within Judaism. We also have to examine how the vertical/internal axis works into terms of this emphasis on personal, intimate relationship with God. Can one have such a relationship with a God who is either transcendent in the traditional sense – dwelling far beyond, outside the universe – or immanent, dwelling deep within the self? But before we turn to that question, we need to look at both philosophy and mysticism in relation to that internal metaphor.

I have mentioned that Philo of Alexandria was the first post-Biblical thinker to develop the idea of God within the self or soul. It is no coincidence that Philo was a Hellenistic Jew, writing in Greek and seeking to create a reading of Biblical Judaism in a Platonic mode. Plato, you may recall, did not think highly of the old Homeric tales of the gods. He even thought of banning the poets who wrote of them from his ideal republic. God for Plato is already quite abstract, the highest ideal of truth known to the human soul. Philo is both a Platonic philosopher and a mystic. His religion is centered on a contemplative idealism in which the soul fulfils itself by discovering its identity with its divine source. In Neo-Platonic thought, influenced by Philo, God is the ultimate source of being, symbolised by light, to which all souls turn and to which they long to be restored. For the Neo-Platonists, who exercised considerable influence on Judaism throughout the Middle Ages, God is both a philosophical category and the object of deep personal desire, often expressed in the persuasive language of poetry.

Philo (c.20 BCE–50 CE) did not have immediate followers who influenced the course of Jewish religious thought. It took nearly a thousand years for Judaism again to be transposed into philosophic terms. When this did happen, beginning in the tenth century, it was largely in the Islamic cultural realm; Jews first came to read the Greek philosophers via Arabic translation, and the most important works of Jewish philosophy were composed in Arabic as well. One of the great goals of this philosophical movement was what has been called a ‘purification’ of the Jewish views of God. To the sophisticated medieval mind the sacred stories of the Bible and especially the seemingly exaggerated tales of the rabbinic *aggadah* seemed embarrassingly primitive and grossly anthropomorphic. Surely one could not believe that these stories were literally true; their value had to lie in some other dimension, either in a moral message they contained or in some more obscure truth that could be unpacked only by means of esoteric interpretation.

The God of the medieval philosophers was transcendent in a different sort of way than that of the rabbis or the old *merkavah* mystics. True, the vertical metaphor was still in use in the rather hierarchical cosmologies of the Middle Ages. The spheres that led to God were depicted as being beyond the planetary spheres that circled around the earth. But essentially the divine world was conceived as a different order of being from the sub-lunar world in which we live. It was entirely immaterial and therefore could be attained not by any sort of physical or vertical journey, but only by an opening of the mind (for the Aristotelians) or by the perfect and unimpeded longing of the soul (Neo-Platonists). The true transcendence of God lay in endless abstraction of the concept and the degree to which the mind had to stretch itself to gain but the smallest intellectual glimpse of the divine reality.

Where did the mind turn to get its idea of God? Scripture was an important guide, of course, especially when read through the lens of proper philosophic interpretation. But essentially the philosophers pursued an inward contemplative path. God was attained by a progressive abstraction of consciousness, an inner mental turning aside from all externals and ‘accidents’ to discover the single abstract truth of being. Thus, despite their seeming loyalty to a hierarchical and even ‘vertical’ worldview, it was the God within their minds and souls who was the true object of philosophical quest. It may be said that both of the root metaphors, the vertical and the internal, were taken in non-literal ways by the philosophers, who saw no conflict between them.

The mystics shared with the philosophers their quest for a pure and abstract notion of divinity. Both sought to discover within the seemingly

naive Biblical/rabbinic heritage a font of profound truth about the nature of reality and the inner relatedness of God, world, and soul. For the mystics, however, this truth was the object of direct human experience and not only intellectual comprehension. A mystic by definition is one who understands religion as centered upon the possibility of such experience, and who sees all the other trappings of the tradition – texts, laws, institutions – as existing for the sake of that experience and its truth. In this sense it may be argued that Maimonides and certain other Jewish philosophers are in fact mystics (though surely not Kabbalists) in their highest visions, even if they see the path to mystic enlightenment as requiring the most rigorous intellectual attainment.

Like the philosophers, the Kabbalists believed it to be within their power to lift the veils of illusion that imprison the unenlightened mind and discover the sublime truth. Although still moved by the Psalmists' outcries of 'Why, O Lord, do You stand far off?' (10:1) or 'Why do you hide Your face?' (44:25), they viewed the seeming distance between God and the self more as a result of human ignorance than of willful divine abandonment. 'Out of the depths I call You, O Lord' (130:1) for the Kabbalist no longer means that he longs for God to rescue him from the depths of despair, but rather that he, the mystic, calls God forth from His own inner depths and brings Him close. The person who was willing to walk the straight road of the disciplined religious life, including both the traditional commandments and the mental and devotional exercises prescribed by the particular school of thought, could achieve great gifts. While formally both Maimonidean philosopher and Kabbalist might have needed to claim that it was God who bestowed the gift of prophecy or enlightenment, they were together in their understanding that most of the journey to God was one of inward human training, the struggle to purify the mind and spirit.

The intimacy with God attained by such a process is not quite the same as the highly personal relationship with the other that we discussed above. Here we are talking about absorption within an all-encompassing oneness of Being rather than the grace of being favoured by the smiling countenance of the divine Beloved. Yet the differences between them turn out to be quite subtle, shaded as they are by the fact that philosophers and mystics too are shaped by the contours of Biblical and rabbinic imagery. The 'Root of Roots' of the Aristotelian and 'the Endless' of the Kabbalist are supposedly not to be seen in personified terms. To do so would be to betray the most essential teachings of these schools of thought. Yet the quest that leads one toward them is described quite passionately, either as fire within the soul or in the erotic language of the Song of Songs. The Kabbalists resolved this tension between the abstract nature of God and

the colourful and passionate religious life by describing a second aspect of divinity; the Endless and indescribable *Eyn Sof* reveals itself to contain ten *sefirot*, which are filled with all the colour, imagery, and mythic/erotic nuance that were lacking in God as One of Ones or Primordial Nothing.

The Hebrew term most used to speak of the intimate relationship between God and the individual is *devekut*, often translated as ‘attachment’ or ‘cleaving’. The verb is used several times in the Book of Deuteronomy to describe the relationship between God and His faithful (‘You who cleave to Y-H-W-H your God are all alive this day’ – 4:4; ‘... to walk in all His ways and to cleave to Him’ – 11:22) and it is from here that it enters the later Jewish religious vocabulary. But the term is also used in a very telling and well-known passage in Genesis 2:24: ‘Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and they shall be one flesh.’ The human experience that stands behind *devekut* is that of marriage, including sexual intimacy, but also implying the long-standing marital fidelity that leads a couple to see themselves as one. *Devekut* with God is entering into a similar state of oneness. At its heights it may indeed be described as mystical union, a moment when the self is completely absorbed and overwhelmed by the reality of oneness. But it also allows for the soul to return to itself, enriched and even transformed by the unitive moment, but still able to live and act as a separate spirit, indeed still able to maintain its existence within the body.

The classical Jewish piety to which I am pointing here is to be found, I am suggesting, within both philosophy and Kabbalah, though in somewhat different forms of expression. It is characterised by what I would like to call a *union of intimacy and abstraction*. Abstraction demands that God be understood as nothing less than the unity of all being, the One that underlies all the infinitely varied and changing faces of reality. It is the One after which there is no ‘two’, because it is a One that knows no other. The power to describe such oneness was not generally native to the language of the ancient Hebrews. It was only in borrowing and adaptation from the Greeks that it could be articulated. Today that borrowing seems to be taking place once again, this time from the philosophical languages of India and Tibet. Westerners who think they cannot ‘believe in God’, meaning that they reject the naive images of the deity inherited from childhood, turn to the deep meditations on the oneness of being found in Buddhist and Vedantic teachings. These insights too may be brought home by returning Jewish voyagers and integrated into our tradition as the teachings of Plato and Aristotle were, so many centuries ago. But to become at home in Judaism these insights into abstraction will have to adapt themselves to the Jewish language of



intimacy as well. Even though we understand that God is no true ‘Other’ to the soul, we continue to speak the Jewish language of love. This language includes both ‘Behold, thou art fair, My beloved’ (Cant. 1:5) and ‘Blessed are You Y-H-W-H, our God, eternal and universal Ruler ...’

My call for devotion to this language is no mere traditionalism or nostalgia for a naive faith once held. I write as a mystic and a monist, one who believes in (and in rare and precious moments has come to know) the essential truth that there is only one Being, and that all distinctions between self and other and between God, world, and soul represent partial betrayals of that truth. I continue to speak a dualistic religious language, however, because I continue to live most of my life, as we all do, on a plane of duality, in a life-experience where the distinction between you and me and the borders between us are pretty important things to remember. My task is to educate and awaken that self, in myself as well as in others. It is the self who lives on that plane who has to be taught and reminded, day by day and moment by moment, that the world of multiplicity and fragmentation is not the ultimate truth. In order to do that teaching, I need to employ a language that such a self can understand. To simply proclaim and repeat the truth of monist abstraction to one who lives in duality will not do. For this purpose I have been given the great gift of human intimacy, a bridge between the worlds of the two and the One. To remind the self of the greatest moments of intimacy and expansion it has known, to take the passion and longing that are such real parts of our shared humanity and to use them as pathways or channels toward that deeper truth, is to follow a path used by mystics over many centuries. It is a way in which the mind can address the soul, calling it along to the great journey.

This union of intimacy and abstraction is expressed in Judaism’s special devotion to the name of God, the four-letter name referred to as *shem ha-meforash*, God’s explicit name that may never be written or pronounced. The name is an impossible configuration of the verb ‘to be’, and should probably best be translated ‘was/is/will be’. But the sounds that comprise the name also indicate abstraction. There is no firm consonant among them; the *y*, the *w*, and the *h* are all nothing more than shapings of the breath. Indeed, these letters are used in ancient Hebrew to indicate vowel signs, showing that they are only marginally to be seen as ‘real’ letters. The name of God is but a breath, nothing you can hold onto very firmly. Indeed if you try to hold on to it, if you think that Y-H-W-H is indeed a noun that indicates some substantial and defineable entity, Scripture laughs at you as God conjugates His own name, showing its true status as a verb, and says: ‘I am that I am’ or perhaps better translate: ‘I shall be whatever I choose to be’ (Ex. 3:14).

But at the same time that this word bears within it the Bible's most abstract notion of the deity, it also serves as a *name*. Names are fraught with both power and intimacy, in the ancient world as well as our own. To know someone's name is to stand in relationship, to be able to call in such a way that the other must respond. 'I raise him up because he knows My name' (Ps. 91:14). A pious Jew refers to *ha-shem yitbarakh*, 'God's blessed name' as an intimate, familiar way of speaking. To call out God's name in prayer is to transcend all other words one might speak. In fact, a well-known Hasidic teaching claims that in true prayer *every* word becomes a name of God.

We do not fully speak the name. Y-H-W-H is too holy a word to be spoken. We for whom words come and go so easily are not allowed to pronounce this word, lest it be profaned by us. Instead we sheath it in the pious garb of *adonai*, 'my Lord'. But each time we pronounce that word in prayer, the Kabbalists tell us, we are to see the letters Y-H-W-H standing before us, visually filling us with an intensity of divine presence that we dare not permit our mouths to speak.

The great calling out of God's name is the recitation of *Shema Yisra'el* – 'Hear O Israel, Y-H-W-H our God, Y-H-W-H is one!' The Torah tells us to speak this verse twice each day, upon rising at dawn and before going to sleep. It is a first prayer taught to young children and it has graced the lips of martyrs from Rabbi Akiva in Roman times to pious Jews in the Holocaust. No act of piety is more characteristic of Judaism than this. It is a statement of intimacy, devotion, and abstraction all at once. Its recitation is referred to in our sources as *yihud ha-shem*, the proclamation of God's oneness.

I conclude with a quotation from a Hasidic master, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Ger (1847–1904), author of *Sefat Emet*. In a letter to his children and grandchildren he spoke with unusual directness about the *shema* and its meaning:

The proclamation of oneness that we declare each day in saying *Shema Yisra'el* ... needs to be understood as it truly is. That which is entirely clear to me ... based on the holy writings of great Kabbalists, I am obligated to reveal to you ... The meaning of 'Y-H-W-H is one' is not that He is the only true God, negating other gods (though that too is true!). But the meaning is deeper than that: there is no being other than God. [This is true] even though it seems otherwise to most people ... Everything that exists in the world, spiritual and physical, is God Himself ... These things are true without a doubt. Because of this, every person can become attached to God wherever He is, through the holiness that exists in every single thing, even corporeal things ... This is the foundation of all the mystical formulations in the world.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

1. I have discussed this theological viewpoint in greater length in my book *Seek My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology* (New edition forthcoming from Jewish Lights in 2002). See especially the first section of that work.
2. See Genesis 3:9. I have in mind also the Hasidic tale of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi and his jailer in St Petersburg. See especially Martin Buber's retelling of that tale in *The Way of Man* (Secaucus NJ: Citadel Press, 1966) pp. 9ff.
3. I have discussed this Midrash in 'The Children in Egypt and the Theophany at the Sea' in *Judaism* 25 (1975) pp. 446–66.
4. *Otsar Mikhtavim u-Ma'amarim* (Jerusalem, 1986) p. 75f. Quoted more fully in the introduction to my selection of teachings from the *Sefat Emet, The Language of Truth* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998) p. 36f.

## Bibliography

For a modern classical statement of Jewish theology at its most profound, there is still no equal to the writings of the late Abraham Joshua Heschel. Especially recommended on the question of God are his *Man Is Not Alone* and *God in Search of Man*. Raised in the Hasidic tradition but inspired also by the ancient prophets, Heschel asks us to hear the divine voice that echoes through all of existence and reverberates within our own hearts.

A more recent neo-classical voice is that of British rabbi Louis Jacobs. Among his many works, *Faith* and *We Have Reason to Believe* stand out as important theological statements. Jacobs is more of a rationalist than Heschel, combining the testimony of religious experience with that of the mind's limitations and the human need for God.

A Reform and Existentialist position is articulated by Eugene Borowitz in his thoughtful and erudite *Renewing the Covenant*. Influenced by Heschel as well as by the German-Jewish giants Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, Borowitz writes of a covenantal Judaism that speaks a very contemporary language.

David Hartman's *A Living Covenant* is a testament to the moral and intellectual vigor of rabbinic Judaism. Although his views on God partially have to be read from 'between the lines', Hartman demonstrates a Judaism of great religious passion in the tradition of Maimonides.

Neil Gillman's *Sacred Fragments* is a good beginning place as it summarises the positions taken by Judaism's leading thinkers in the twentieth century. Having taken into consideration the views of such major figures as Buber, Rosenzweig, Heschel and Mordecai Kaplan, Gilman sets out to see what room is left for further theological innovation.

Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai* is the best articulation of the feminist critique of Jewish theology and the longing of many women to provide a new theological voice within the Jewish community. Although critical of women's exclusion, it is written by one who has a love for the tradition and wants to be seen as a thoughtful insider, rather than one who criticises from without.

Arthur Green's own contribution to the contemporary theological discourse is *Seek My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology*. This is a neo-mystical work, a view of Judaism shaped by many years of studying the Kabbalistic and Hasidic traditions. Green seeks to use the essential insights of these sources to construct a new mystical theology of Judaism.

Copyright of European Judaism is the property of Berghahn Books and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.