

All About Being Human

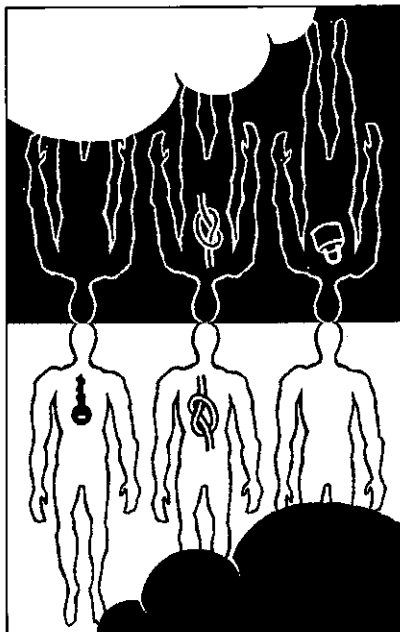
Image, Likeness, Memory

Arthur Green

The faith of Judaism has been characterized throughout its history by commitment to a *personal* religious language. The biblical legacy that describes God as a super-person, one with both emotional and something like physical characteristics, has never been fully overcome, despite many attempts to do so. Jewish philosophers were embarrassed by this language and sought to explain it away. The mystics chose rather to absorb these personal images in a great sea of metaphor, one in which *all* of language was a way of speaking about God. But Jews everywhere continued to use the personal address form of prayer, speaking both to and of God as though a person.

The origin and nature of being, seemingly the most abstract of all questions, is addressed in personal terms. "Lift up your eyes," says the prophet (Isa. 40:26), "and see *who* created these." This religious language is being seriously challenged in our day. The new encounter with Eastern religions has taught many in the West that it is possible to have a deep religious life outside this personalist language. Yet Judaism, even that of the most sophisticated Jewish thinkers, continues to insist on it for an important reason. The personalist view of God is the basis for Judaism's most central moral teaching: Every human being is created in God's image. That statement in the opening tale of Genesis is the basis for all of Jewish ethics. It is, according to some of the ancient rabbis, the most basic rule of Torah.

The Genesis account begins with two words for what we call "the image of God." *Tselem* is "image" in an almost physical sense, the way in which the child is "the spittin' image" of the parent. The old Targum renders the word by the Greek "icon;" every human being is God's icon. No wonder we have no icons in the synagogue; the synagogue is



filled with icons as soon as we walk in! The word *tselem*, by the way, is the basis for the modern Hebrew *matslemah*, the word for "camera," a device that can capture this sort of image. The second term, *demut*, is somewhat more subtle. "Likeness" is probably the right word for it. To be "like" something is to be comparable to it. But here we have a great problem. The prophet says quite clearly, speaking in God's name: "To whom will you compare Me, that I be likened?" and "To whom will you compare God? What likeness can you offer to Him (Isa. 40:18, 25)?" Can we indeed be "like" God?

Tselem refers to our hard wiring. We have within us a soul or a spark of inner divinity that is absolutely real and uncom-

promised. The entire macrocosm, the Self of the universe, is there within each human self, along with the ability, each in our own way, to discover that truth. But *demut* is all about potential. To continue the computer imagery, it is the program we create on the basis of that great hardware, the life we live. We *are* the *tselem* of God; we can choose to *become* God's *demut* as we work to live and fashion our lives in God's image.

Memory is one aspect of what it means to be in God's image. Memory begins as soon as there is humanity; humanity begins with memory. The treatise *Pirkey Avot*, the wise sayings of the Mishnaic Masters, contains a strange list of "Ten things created on Friday, as the sun was setting: the Mouth of the Earth, the Mouth of the Well, the Mouth of the Ass; the rainbow, the manna, the staff, and the worm; the script, the inscription, and the tablets; (some add: the demons and Moses' burial place) and Abraham's ram (and some add: and tongs, which are made with tongs)." What a strange list! If we delete the "some add" additions, we realize that all these last-minute creations have to do with miracles, moments when resort to the supernatural was required in order to help God's children out of an impossible situation. (How good are you at Bible stories? The Mouth of the Earth swallowed up Korah and the rebels against Moses, the Mouth of Miriam's Well provided water in the wilderness,

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and the Mouth of the Ass kept Balaam from cursing Israel. The rainbow concluded the flood, the manna sustained Israel for forty years, and the worm bored through the stones used to build the Temple, so they would not be cut with a weapon that could make war. Three miracles are devoted to the writing of the Ten Commandments on the tablets, and the ram replaced Isaac as a sacrifice.)

But there has to be a story behind this list. Why were these things created on Friday at sunset? Why not earlier? Why not just as they were needed? Here is my account of how it happened (all in the language of the old Creation story to be sure. You may translate it, if you like, into post-Darwinian). Each day had its own creations, and after each day God said that it was good. On Friday the land animals were scheduled to be created, and indeed they were. Still God felt there was something missing; it could not yet be called "good." So God turned to whoever God turned (a big puzzle, but not our concern right here) and said: "Let us make humans...." But as soon as the first human beings were there, something new and unanticipated happened to God: *History* opened up before the Throne of Glory.

As long as the world had been inhabited only by plants and animals, there was no history. Plants and animals live, reproduce, and die without leaving memory behind, except in their genes. But as soon as there were humans, there was all of human history stretched out for God to see. And there were humans looking back at God, saying: "You remember the whole thing." You, Lord, are a God of memory. But in fact "remember" was a new word for God, for whom what we call past, present, and future are all one, always. Now God looked "ahead" down this unfurled path of human memory and began to see where humans would get in trouble. Wherever possible, some device was created to help them out; these were the miracles. And if you ask: "Why are there no miracles in our day?" the answer is obvious. The sun set, and God's time to make miracles ran out. Had creation gone on, God would have violated the first Sabbath, and no one would ever have kept it. For the rest of history after Moses, in other words, *shabbat*—the ability to step off the treadmill of humdrum existence—is our only miracle.

To be human is to remember. To lose memory is to lose a piece of ourselves. To lose all of memory is one of the great human tragedies; some part (though surely not all) of the divine light in us goes out with it. We remember our own lives as individuals, and each person's uniqueness develops over time out of the memories that he or she carries. But we also remember as families, as tribes, nations, and societies. Civilization is built on the passing down, celebration, and interpretation of memory. Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, in one of his famous *Tales*, asks: "Who remembers the oldest thing?" One of the speakers in the story remembers infancy, another recalls being in the womb, still another remembers the moment of his own (or the world's) conception. But the youngest of the company, who was also

the greatest rememberer of all, says: "I remember nothing." This, of course, is the great Nothing that precedes creation. "And all agreed," Rabbi Nahman concludes, "that this memory was indeed the greatest."

We Jews are *commanded* to remember. We believe that all humans share the command to remember Creation and the covenant with Noah, of which we are all a part. The covenant is God's promise not to destroy the world. The memory of Creation has to be our promise to do the same. Today it is we, and not the blind forces of nature, that are the more likely enemies of the world's survival. To remember Creation is to remember that we are here for a purpose: to become aware. We are here to know, articulate, celebrate, and share with all others the truth that being is one, that H-W-Y-H, "being," is Y-H-W-H, that there is none other.

Our Human Task: To Re-Member

Here we can turn from the old Creation story to the new one, the sacred version of the tale of evolution that is just beginning to emerge in our day. If the evolutionary process is the ongoing struggle of the divine One toward intelligent and articulate life forms, as I have suggested, we need to ask ourselves what it is that the One within us needs from us. Why are we here, we creatures who have begun to have some inkling of the process and of the One within it? The answer is that we are here to *re-member*, or to rejoin the links of a creation that has been rent asunder. The job of each human being is to teach every other human being that we are all one, and to find ways in our behavior, as well as our thought, to include all other creatures within that vision of oneness as well.

This is the basis of all religion. Judaism teaches us that there are two kinds of commandments: those "between person and God," referring to the spiritual and ritual paths, and those "between person and person," encompassing the moral/ethical life. Both of these categories, I believe, may be seen as rooted in the universal and natural mysticism I am suggesting here. We exist in order to become aware, to lend self-articulation to the One. That, if you will, is the first commandment of nature. But it is also the first commandment of Sinai, or at least of its opening words: "I am Y-H-W-H your God." All the rest of religion, insofar as it applies to the realm "between person and God" is just a spelling out of this, a creation of forms through which we remember the single truth. The forms themselves vary from one religion to another; ultimately they are all arbitrary. We change or restrict our behavior in a certain way, we say certain words or undertake certain actions, in order to remind ourselves, on a regular basis, of the truth of God and the oneness of all being. In this sense we must admit that all the forms are of human origin; it is people and societies that create or evolve religions. But all of these forms are created as a way of *responding* to an inner, almost instinctual drive to recall that deeper truth. In this sense they are also of divine origin, and

JUDAISM

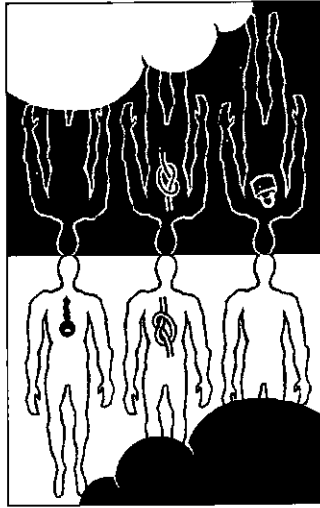
in this very abstract way we may say that a divine imperative stands behind them.

Our second job as religious people is to share this realization of oneness with others. We do so most successfully not by preaching, but by actions. We let others know that we and they are part of the same One when we treat them like sisters and brothers, or like parts of our same single universal body. "Love your neighbor as yourself," interpreted to include *all* our neighbors, indeed is a good "basic principle of Torah." Here all the commandments "between person and person" have their natural root. And here too the forms of sharing are based on human experience and forms of social interaction that are wholly ours, yet the imperative that lies behind them comes from a deeper place. We are called upon to proclaim the oneness of being throughout the world and to enable all those with whom we come in contact to feel themselves as part of that oneness as well. And we might think about how to extend that sense of "neighbor" beyond the human to the rest of our fellow-creatures.

But we Jews have some other things we have to remember. "Remember that you were a slave in the Land of Egypt," we are taught. And also "Remember the day you came out of Egypt, all the days of your life (Deut. 16:3)." Both slavery and liberation need to be remembered. These are an essential part of our Jewish vision of being human. Why? The memory of being slaves is our way of identifying with human suffering, especially the suffering of the oppressed. The Torah tells us to remember slavery when it instructs us on how to treat the stranger who lives in our midst. To recall that we were slaves has to make it impossible for us to enslave or oppress others; to do so is a betrayal of our own worst nightmares. To remember the liberation from Egypt is to recall the struggle to become free. We have to remember that Pharaoh made things worse once we became troublemakers; we also have to recall that we did not leave Egypt empty handed, but loaded down with gold and silver vessels that had belonged to our oppressors.

All these memories serve to help us when we look upon others' struggles for freedom from bondage and are called upon to help. They stood by us in the early days of America's Civil Rights struggles and in the battle for change in South Africa. Of course there were Jews who resisted identifying with the causes of others, thinking of the Exodus as our own exclusive story. But the narrowness of this reading of Torah was obvious to most. There are other times, however, when the message of remembering Egypt becomes much harder to hear.

I write these words (in Jerusalem, as it happens) in the midst of a terrible time within Jewish history, a period when we, the Jewish people, are involved in the oppression of another people, the Palestinian Arabs who dwell in the Land



of Israel together with us. This book is not a political treatise and I will not pretend in it to have the answer to one of the most vexing political conflicts of our time. Nor do I in any way seek to diminish the Palestinian leaders' and people's responsibility for the terrible atrocities they continue to commit. Some claim that the conquest of 1967 and the ensuing occupation was forced upon us by Palestinian intransigence, and was a requirement of self-preservation. Perhaps it was, but it should have been resolved by a truly generous solution long ago. Our complicity in the ongoing long-term Occupation and settle-

ment remains great, especially since we have profited so much from it. However complex the genesis of this situation, there is a terrible incongruity of our people's returning to the land of our ancient freedom, the place where we came after we ceased to be slaves, only to find ourselves ruling over others in order to keep them from destroying us. Judaism, as a teaching that demands human freedom, cannot thrive in such a context. I fear to say that all of us Jews, as well as the rich Jewish expression that has flourished in the years since conquest and occupation, will have to struggle long and hard to free ourselves of the taint of *'osbek*, ill-gotten gain attained through the oppression of others.

Remember slavery and remember liberation. Let them give you a bad conscience. Sometimes you need it.

The memories of Egypt and of the Exodus are part of our individual spiritual lives as well as our collective heritage as Jews. They help us to fight our own personal struggles for freedom and give us hope that we can defeat whatever it is that enslaves us, defeat it so fully and finally that we can see it sinking in the deep waters of the sea as we walk across to freedom. The kabbalists say that the divine power that saved us from Egypt was the force of *binah*. *Binah* represents the great mother figure within God, the womb of rebirth. Israel comes forth reborn after crossing the sea; liberation is like a new birth. This is our Jewish way of saying that you can be "born again." It is a vital (in the literal sense of "life-giving") message to all those who are caught up in the throes of enslavement to compulsive behavior, to addictions, or to whatever it is that leads to slavery or degradation of self. Freedom is a real possibility. The day may yet come when we will dance at the far shore of that sea.

Even that isn't the end of the story, to be sure. Forty years of wandering in the wilderness still lie ahead after we come out of Egypt. Sometimes we even think we want to go back. For those moments my favorite verse of Scripture is "Just as You have carried this people from Egypt to here ... (Num. 14:19)"—when things get bad we only have to remember how far we have come. The God-given strength that has carried us this far through our wanderings can surely take us the rest of the way as well. Just remember. □

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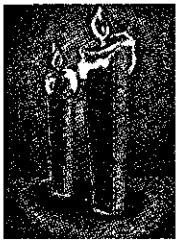
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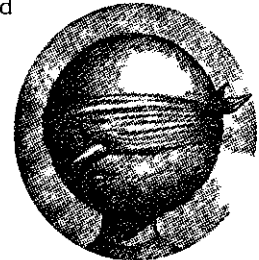
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Opposite: "Our father, our king" by Susan Comminos
 Front Cover: *After the Eleventh* by PJ Crook.
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CORNEL WEST

9-11 REPENTANCE:
HIGH HOLIDAY SUPPLEMENT

A BIMONTHLY JEWISH CRITIQUE OF POLITICS, CULTURE & SOCIETY

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2002

DENIAL AMERICAN AND JEWISH STYLE

A
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HOW THE U.S. LEARNED SO LITTLE FROM 9-11

Thomas Moore • Elizabeth Lesser • Fred Branfman
Zygmunt Bauman • Danny Goldberg • Morris Dickstein
Phyllis Chesler • Lama Surya Das • Margaret Wheatley
Lawrence L. Langer • Robert Thurman

FEAR AND TRIBALISM IN ISRAELI AND AMERICAN JEWS

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by Shavit Artson, & Shmuley Boteach on Repentance
Arthur Green on God and Memory
Betty Jean Lifton on Being Adopted
on the Participatory Nature of Spiritual Knowledge