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A JOURNAL OF JEWISH IDEAS

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44/708
April 2014 | Nissan 5774

Inside

Cultivating Spiritual Intensity

In response to the recent passage of a Knesset bill mandating that Haredim serve in the Israel Defense Forces, outraged ultra-Orthodox leaders argued that yeshiva students, by focusing on Jewish study and prayer, already perform a spiritual service that is crucial for protecting the country. No matter how we might weigh-in on this matter, or on the argument's legitimacy, it offers a vivid example of how the term 'spiritual' carries in it both personal as well as communal implications. The many different meanings of spirituality are the focus of this issue of *Sh'ma*. Rabbi Arthur Green, rector of the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College, opens up the issue with a powerful call for spiritual engagement that seeks to update the tropes of Hasidism — where the focus of attention is on the personal encounter with the divine. I've invited several rabbinical seminary heads and others to respond to his call with questions and arguments of their own. How spiritual practice works without a commanding God, and whether such exercises are serious — perhaps even narcissistic — are among the questions explored. Other writers ask whether a focus on a spiritual quest deflects attention from the concrete world around us.

Some of us find ourselves returning to just these questions again and again over the course of our lifetime. Others might be inclined to look beyond them, even flee from them. But it is difficult to ignore how one's relationship with God and prayer intersects with how we relate to others, how we grow families, build communities, and describe ourselves as Jews. Here, in these next pages, mysticism, a farm, the Shabbat dinner table, a painter's canvass, and FaceTime, all play a role in this conversation.

— Susan Berrin, Editor-in-chief

Awakening the Heart

ARTHUR GREEN

Among my many sins in the course of my life is the responsibility for making the word "spirituality" respectable in the Jewish community. When I was soliciting articles for my two-volume *Jewish Spirituality* collection in 1983 (part of a 25-volume *World Spirituality* series), several scholars dismissed the idea, insisting that there was no such thing. The concept was Catholic, they told me, and distinctively not Jewish. I therefore articulated a clear and tradition-rooted definition of what I meant by the term: a religious life that recognizes and cultivates the human soul, seeking in daily life the holiness originally associated with sacred space, time, and personhood. Over the years (especially with the help of my friends at Jewish Lights Publishing), the language of spirituality has gained wide credence. "Spiritual but not religious" is now a very widespread self-categorization among Jews under 40. Even those uncomfortable with the word now have to pay attention.

My own turn toward an inward, religion-of-the-heart-centered reading of Judaism stemmed from a long love affair with the sources of Jewish mysticism, especially Hasidism. That love was surely born of my own temperament and needs. It was certainly not intended as a strategy for Jewish survival. But now, as I watch other rationales for an ongoing commitment to Judaism slip away, I believe that this neo-Hasidic or spiritual orientation will become ever more important in our future religious language.

Traditional religion fought two great battles across the earlier part of the 20th century. One was the struggle against Darwinism, by which I mean not only evolutionary biology, but also the whole emerging picture of the universe and the history of the earth as depicted by astrophysics and geology. The other battle was focused on biblical criticism and the human authorship of sacred scripture. This

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battle engaged Jews more than the struggle with Darwinism, for the authority of tradition seemed to stand or fall with it. Traditional religion decisively lost both of these battles. Among college-educated people in the Western world, the conclusions were clear. And with this disillusionment, the twin pillars of classical Jewish theology — Creation and Revelation — were challenged. This, combined with the greatest of all challenges to Jewish faith, the Holocaust, left us reeling. How could we Jews proclaim faith in a God of providence and history, especially one who had chosen Israel for special love and protection, after 1945?

"Do you experience God creating the world each day, encountering a divine presence in the natural world around you? What does that encounter call upon you to do?"

For the next half-century, we Jews were mostly too busy surviving and rebuilding our lives to worry much about theology. The emergence of Israel, especially the surprising victory in the 1948 war, created some talk of miracles, and a certain combination of religious Zionism and civic pride in Jewish peoplehood and our accomplishments (including the remarkable rescue of Soviet Jewry) served as a sort of *ersatz* religion, as described by Jacob Neusner and others. But that replacement for faith had run its course by the turn of the 21st century, largely for demographic reasons. American Jews raised after 1967, the fourth and fifth generations after immigration, were no longer swayed by loyalty to the traumas of their grandparents' generation. They felt fully at home in America, and were quite distant from the ancient faith toward which even the preceding generations had maintained such a tepid and ambivalent relationship. Among the significant number who did have spiritual leanings, newly imported versions of Eastern teachings were often more attractive than Judaism.

Where, then, are we left? We know that we are the bearers of one of the world's greatest spiritual traditions, one often maligned and misunderstood. We care deeply about its survival; some form of "*ve-shinantan le-vanekha*" — "teach them diligently to your children" — remains the single mitzvah to which Jews remain most committed. But with what rationale? Is there any truth-claim of Judaism to which we still adhere? Is there a framework, either conceptual or experiential, that is meaningful to emerging generations?

Here, I return to the language of spirituality. A radical spiritualization of Judaism's truth, begun within Hasidism some 200 years ago, needs to be updated and universalized to appeal to today's Jewish seeker. This would offer the possibility of a religious language that addresses contemporary concerns while calling for a deep, faith-based attachment to the essential forms and tropes of Jewish piety. It will do so (unlike traditional Hasidism) without insisting on indefensible historical or scientific claims.

Mystical religion, by its very nature, shifts the focus of attention away from the positive/historical and inward toward the devotional/experiential. Here, the question is not: "Do you believe that God created the world, and when?" but rather: "Do you experience God creating the world each day, encountering a divine presence in the natural world around you?" Such a religious experience also asks: "What does that encounter call upon you to do?" We will not be concerned with whether the tale of Egyptian bondage and liberation is historically verifiable or not. The question is rather: "Have *you* come out of Egypt?" referring to whatever it is that keeps the individual in the narrow straits of his or her own *mitzrayim*. Perhaps most transformative for Judaism, we will not ask, "Did Israel hear God's word at Sinai, and how much of the Torah was given there?" but rather: "Can you feel yourself standing before the mountain as you hear the words of Torah? Can you say, 'We will do and we will listen' in this eternal Sinai moment?"

The "events" of Israel's sacred narrative are here read unapologetically as myth rather than history, but that makes their voice *more* powerful rather than less. To be a religious Jew means entering into that myth in a way that calls forth a deep personal engagement and commitment.

The God of this religion is not the commanding Other who rules over history, nor the God of reward and punishment. Rather, God is found in the still, small voice that calls us to open our hearts and turn our lives toward goodness. This sort of new mystical or Neo-Hasidic piety turns toward the natural world as a source of inspiration, seeing existence and beauty as objects of wonder and devotion (even in the face of nature's indifference to our individual human plight). This makes it especially appropriate to the 21st century, when religion's most vital task may be that of

Rabbi **Arthur Green** is the founding dean and, now, rector of the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College in Newton Centre, Mass., and its Irving Brudnick Professor of Jewish Philosophy and Religion. He has taught Jewish mysticism, Hasidism, and theology to several generations of students at the University of Pennsylvania, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (where he served as both dean and president), Brandeis University, and Hebrew College. Green is the founder of Havurat Shalom, an egalitarian Jewish community in Somerville, Mass., and he remains a leading independent figure in the Jewish Renewal movement. He is the author of more than a dozen books, most recently *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition* (Yale University Press, 2010). Each year since 2008, Green has been named by *Newsweek* and The Daily Beast as one of the top 50 influential rabbis in America.

transforming our attitude toward the natural world and working to preserve it.

This religion is about cultivating spiritual intensity and awakening the heart. Such a faith, especially in the context of Judaism, seeks expression in traditional forms. It understands, however (along with classical Hasidism) that observance is not an end in itself, but a means of arousing the heart and an expression of that heart's fullness and desire to give, now both within and beyond the Jewish community.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to such an approach is the question: "*Is it serious?*" Can a religion without literalist claims to divine will and dictate command the hearts of its adherents, who face tremendous assimilatory pressures no less great than the threats of martyrdom in prior ages? Are its devotees prepared to *submit* and *serve* when there is no literal king standing over them? Or is their alleged spirituality perhaps just another personal experience they wish to taste, somewhat lightly, thank you, as part of their endless quest for self-indulgence, even of the most refined sort? This challenge stands especially before the spiritual leaders and teachers of the emerging generations, as they seek to forge a Jewish language that will speak to their age.

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Still Singing at Sinai

TZEMAH YOREH

In a conversation with Rabbi Arthur Green a number of years ago, he remarked that our religious views differed by only a couple of inches. He and I both understood the textual reference; he was referring to the distance separating the upper and lower chasms according to the Talmud — or, in other words, the distance between heaven and hell. Green is a panentheist, holding a worldview that subscribes to the notion that God is in everything. I subscribe to agnosticism, a materialist worldview that doubts if God exists in anything, or in any form. Rather than seeking a relationship with the enigmatic divine, I derive my world of meaning from text and poetry, as well as from celebration, family, and friendships. The difference between us is akin to what Green focuses on in his essay — namely, the notion of spirituality. I laud Green for making spirituality a valid self-definition for many Jews, but, as a textual scholar, Green may share some of my dismay that many who self-define as spiritual are not cognizant of the textual fount from which their spiritualism springs forth.

This is perhaps apparent in what Green identifies as a main weakness of his — the danger of superficiality: "Perhaps the greatest challenge to such an approach is the question: '*Is it serious*?' … Or is their alleged spirituality perhaps just another personal experience they wish to taste, somewhat lightly, thank you, as part of their endless quest for self-indulgence…?'"

My question is: Why dismiss the Judaism that is tried and tested and that has endured for centuries? Why exchange that Judaism for an untested approach that locates the sacred in a personal encounter with an amorphous divine rather than in our rich and varied textual tradition?

As a traditional Jew who has embraced both Charles Darwin and Julius Wellhausen, I find it troubling that, according to Green, "… traditional religion decisively lost both of these battles." Green dismisses a traditional Judaism that is non-Darwinian, that sees the Exodus as historic (rather than mythic), and that feels anchored by *halakhah* (Jewish law) and texts. Yet, as Green freely admits, his neo-Hasidism has no anchor of this sort (his substitutes, such as a commitment to preserve the natural world, are laudable, but they do not serve the same anchoring function).

I do not stand at Sinai. I consciously emphasize the elements of Jewish law and tradition that I find compelling and I interpret our tradition through humanist values.

Traditional Judaism is coherent, vibrant, and expanding (in terms of sheer numbers). At a time when assimilation and secularism are on the rise, the growth of this sector can't be attributed simply to birthrate. Rather, we also attribute its growth to the hold of authentic and enduring Jewish texts and traditions. Although biblical criticism (my own bread and butter) has challenged the historicity of most of the Torah, and science has successfully disputed the notion that the world is 6,000 years old, traditional Jews who believe in the Torah's veracity are not self-delusional. Rather, they exercise a selective blindness, something we all

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Tzemah Yoreh, a resident at CLAL: The National Jewish Center for Leadership and Learning, earned his doctorate in Bible from the Hebrew University in 2004. His books include *The First Book of God* and *The Humanist Prayer Omnibus*.