

The *Shema* and its blessings may now be seen as a tapestry in which three strands of realizing God's kingship are interwoven. Ancient Israel realized God's sovereignty by the Song of the Sea; the angels realized it by chanting the *kedusha* and contemporary Israel does so by proclaiming the *Shema*. Through reciting and feeling the *Shema* and its blessing, the worshiper comes to accept God as creator, revealer and redeemer.

Session IV

Judaism and Spirituality: A Jewish Mysticism for Our Age

Professor Arthur Green

We begin our deliberation with a deceptively simple-seeming question: what does it mean to be a religious human being? What difference does it make in our worldview, attitude or behavior that we choose to call ourselves "religious"?

The theology that emanates from this ground-question takes humans and the realm of personal experience, rather than God and the origins or nature of the cosmos, as its starting point. The position it assumes is thus to be described as "existential." This term should also be taken in its other sense: there are life-and-death issues at stake in the ground-questions of religion. Life without hope of ultimate meaning is not worth living. At the same time, this theological approach takes universal human questions rather than uniquely Jewish ones as its point of departure. The great Jewish theologies have always sought to deal with universal questions of human existence. The answers such theologies provide are of course rooted in the Jewish tradition and speak the very particular language of Judaism. The questions to which these answers are addressed, however, are those of all humanity.

Our question also implies an assumption, or an article of faith, if you will: we claim that the reli-

תלמוד תורה
כנגד כלם.

The study of Torah is
worth all else.
Mishnah

gious is a specific and irreducible element of human experience. It can neither be wholly accounted for by social scientific explanations nor can it be explained away by reference to other aspects of human experience extrinsic to its own self-understanding. Such a claim clearly implies that moderns who have understood themselves in "secular" terms over the course of the past century or more have cut themselves off from an ancient and previously all-pervasive aspect of human experience. This area of human activity, defined broadly as "spiritual quest," "search for God" or "religious devotion," represents humanity at its most noble and profound; seeking to live in the presence of that which transcends us makes us most fully human.

The Hasidic sources — of the early days, before Hasidism took on the role of defending the tradition — bespeak a notion of *da'at* or "awareness" as a central edifying value of religious life. The Hasidic master, like his counterpart in other traditions of mystical master/disciple instruction sees himself as a teacher of spiritual wakefulness or awareness. In this he is differentiated from both the rabbi, teacher and arbiter of religious praxis, and the earlier Kabbalistic master, transmitter of esoteric lore. The Hasidic teacher rather seeks to *use* the tradition and its language as a resource for the cultivation of the inner life. It is this task which he sees as the very core of religion. *Religion is the cultivation of an awareness that we live in relation to the transcendent.* The life of the religious person — insofar as it is authentically that — is a life lived in constant striving for this awareness and in response to the demands made by it. All the institutions, practices, beliefs and taboos of religion are, from this point of view, centered around that awareness.

The actual experience of transcendence is both the beginning and end of this search for awareness. Experience, even of the most undefined or

inchoate sort, is the starting point of religion. Without some taste of transcendence we would not have patience for the great demands that religious discipline makes upon us; we would not see light at the end of the tunnel had we not known some light at the outset. The search is on one level the attempt to make constant, or at least regular, in human life a level of insight that has already existed in moments of spontaneous flash. This is called in biblical language *le-ma'an tizkeru* ("so that you remember"): you perform the commandments — or live the religious life — so that you remember that "I am the Lord thy God." You are commanded to recreate by means of disciplinary regimen the awareness that had once been given you in a moment of divine grace. The realization that life is studded with such moments is the gift granted in retrospect to the one who has walked far along the path.

Thus far, no ontological claims have been made, no mention of the "existence" of God or of the objective reality of a realm transcendent to the universe as we generally know it. Claims have only been about aspects of human experience; they remain in the realm of shared subjectivity rather than in that of objective or scientific truth.

Speaking about the religious reality "in itself," fully cognizant of the philosophical impossibilities of that task, there is discomfort with the English word "God." This term, rooted as it is in Germanic paganism, does little to express personal reality. The Hebrew ineffable name, written consonantly Y-H-W-H, goes a lot further. It can be taken (perhaps midrashically) as an arrested form of the verb "to be," an impossible conflate of that verb in all its tenses at once. It refers to all that was, all that is, all that will be, taken poised amid collective singular motion. Y-H-W-H is, in short, all of being, but so unified and concentrated as to become Being. This is a deity beyond naming, one that fills all names as the soul fills the body,

transcending them all as it fills them. It is none other than the universe, yet it bespeaks a vision of that universe so utterly transformed by integration and unity as to appear to us as indeed "other." It is beyond the experience of our ordinary mind, even beyond articulation in any language except that of mythmaker or poet, and yet it is none "other" than we ourselves and the world in which we live.

Such a religious viewpoint is that of mystic and naturalist at once. It demands no "leap of faith" as does the miracle-working deity of conventional Western theism. It requires rather a "leap of consciousness," an openness to considering the possibility of a universe more whole, more beautiful, more perfect than the ordinary well-guarded mind could ever allow. It calls for the sort of mind that can see Eden in a backyard in Brooklyn, that can feel the presence of Sinai on an "ordinary" Tuesday afternoon or can make almost anywhere into the Promised Land. Not faith but *vision* is what such a religion demands; it does not call upon us to believe in the prophets, but rather to develop the prophetic consciousness in ourselves.

The roots of this rather radical theological formulation can be traced in Hasidism. The masters spoke of the universe as the "garbing" of God, of divinity as a spirit that flows through and fills all the worlds just as it transcends them. One tradition described reality as a cosmic aleph, a single One composed of two letters yod joined by a vav. (think of the form of a printed aleph). The two yods are the divine mind and the human mind, two aspects of or levels of consciousness in the single One. They are both linked and separated by the vav, the principle of both flow and division. Another school of Hasidism speaks of an ongoing dance of self-discovery between two aspects of the same divine self, one that "fills" the world and the other that "surrounds" or transcends it. Only

as the human mind becomes the setting in which these eternal two discover their oneness is the purpose of human life fulfilled.

A sense of mystery and ultimate ineffability is much of what these formulations have to offer. Once the human mind opens itself to a higher state of being, it comes to realize that there are in fact infinite levels to be attained, rung beyond rung, depth within depth, without limit and without definition. A religious language that is to have any power must be evocative of this endless and mysterious reality without claiming to exhaust or even fully comprehend it.

It is suggested that the best of mystical religious teaching can be separated from the more simplistic theism with which it has generally been associated in the Western mind. The marriage between theism and mysticism has always been a tense one, the mystic ever seeking to break down walls where the theist sought to build them up. The mystics' insights can in our day be more harmoniously wedded to a naturalistic theology, one that shares with mysticism an unwillingness to make sharp separations between the divine and mortal realms. The insights of mysticism will be a vital addition to natural theology, saving it from its classic pitfalls of shallowness, self-assuredness and inability to provide sufficiently rich mythic ground in which to sow the seeds of a demanding life of religious practice. Ritual without myth is empty; for the naturalist to create and appreciate myth, a sense of mystery and ultimate ineffability will have to be restored to naturalistic religion. It is this that the mystic has to offer.

But, "in the end," you want to know, "does this fellow believe in God?" Are his careful formulations merely evasive and, if so, what is it that he is trying to avoid saying?

The figure of God as conventionally imaged by

5 religion is a human projection. The person on the throne, to paraphrase one surprisingly radical Hasidic formulation, is there because we put him there. There would be no God-figure had we not created or projected it. In this sense, this can be called nonbelief. Despite this formulation, there can be conviction that the search for God is the most ennobling of human activities, and that the reality and irreducibility of religious experience are beyond question. The contention is faithful to what seems to be the truest essence of religion throughout its history.

This theological position, like every abstract theology in our history, is faced by a dual challenge: does your theology work devotionally (i.e., can you *pray* to such a God?) and is your theology essentially Jewish? One cannot but feel here the weight of such questions as they were to Maimonides or to Hermann Cohen (remember Cohen's father's piercing quip: "But where is the God of Abraham?"). To both of these we can truthfully answer with a resounding "Yes!" But both such affirmations require some explanation.

Our awareness that all images of God are human projections may not keep us from turning to such images in our religious lives. The search requires a turning inward and a reaching toward psychological depths that cannot be addressed without emotion; the way to God leads through our deepest and most pained emotional selves and cannot detour around them. Since our emotional lives are created and developed through encounters with other human figures, we need in some part to approach the inner work of religious transformation by confronting such an "other" in the personhood of God. We realize that in doing this we are performing an act of personification, lending a human face to that which has none without us. But it is only by doing so that we become comfortable addressing the divine universe as a "Thou," becoming engaged with it to the full

depth of our human subjectivity. It is chiefly God as person whom we can love, at whom we can shout in anger, with whom we can share pain. This God, especially as embodied in the father-figure of our prayer-book (and the Freudian insight is helpful here), has to be accepted, contended with and sometimes surely "killed," in the spirit of the old Buddhist adage. But those of us who have rejoiced at the liberation we once felt in the "death" of God now, on the far shores of our atheism, find ourselves resurrecting Him. In the process of becoming whole and becoming adult we have allowed ourselves again to love, laugh and cry with the beloved patriarch of our childhood fantasies. God may be a figment of our imagination indeed. But our imagination, we should always remember, is itself a figment of divinity.

The Jewishness of this theology, like that of most others we have created, lies in its language. Yes, one could use the same ideas to construct a Christianity or perhaps even more easily a Buddhism. But it is the language, the points of reference, the scriptural roots and the ties to praxis that make a theology belong to a particular tradition. We turn to Judaism not because it is superior to all the world's religions, and certainly not because it is God's single will, but because it is our own. The tradition, its texts, its practices, the beloved act of study, are a spiritual home. For all the conflict in staying in that home, it has ultimately been a rich and nurturing one. Torah, in the broadest sense, is the language we know best and love best; as such, it is also that which calls forth our deepest human response. In that sense it is natural and spiritually most appropriate to remain a Jew. The Judaism to which one relates is that of the tradition in its most whole and authentic form; traditions work best when they are least diluted. This is not to say that one has to be a fully practicing Jew as the Orthodox would understand the term; it is enough to feel

addressed and challenged by each word of the Torah, by each commandment as defined by the sages.

What then of change? Is our age no different than ages past? Can you expect Jews in the free society, in the world after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, in a history transformed by renewed Jewish statehood, to live as though they were still in the ghetto-defined past?

Of course not. Change has come, whether we accept it or not; we do best if we make peace with it. There are aspects of the religious task in this hour which are different than those we have ever faced before. These refer primarily to our work as religious people in the societal and moral transformation of this world. There are ways in which our tradition needs to grow, ways in which it might even be improved. But we must never lose sight of the fact that the deeper task of religion is one that is common to all ages and to all humans. Learning awareness and building a life to be lived in constant awareness of that which transcends us and calls upon us ever to transcend, to transform and to grow — these are demands of Y-H-W-H. As such they do not change with the times. In the divine eternal all time is One.

עַרְבָּה חַיִּים.
עַרְבָּה חַיִּים.

The more Torah, the more life.
Pirkei Avot

Session V

Civil Judaism and the Future of Jewish Belief

Professor Jonathan Woocher

We will attempt to address five questions:

- 1
What do we mean by a Jewish “civil religion”?
- 2
How did “civil Judaism” develop?
- 3
What are the fundamental elements of “civil Judaism” today, including its tenets, myths and rituals?
- 4
What accounts for the power of “civil Judaism” in American Jewish life?
- 5
What is the religious significance of “civil Judaism”?

Definitions of “Religion” and “Civil Religion”

There is basic disagreement among scholars regarding the definition of religion. There are essentially two schools of thought. The substantive approach deals with the way people relate to the holy or sacred and to the transcendent or

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