

# Personal Theology

Arthur Green

I would like to address you, both hearers and readers, from an inner place, that is not the locus of most rabbinical convention speeches or journal articles. My opening פסוק for this address is Psalm 42:8: תהום אל תהום קוֹרָא לְקוֹל צְנוּרִי כֹל מִשְׁבְּרוֹי וְגִלְךָ עָלַי עֵבֶר; which I will translate for our purpose as “Depth calls out to depth, a voice seeking your channels, as all the mighty waves and breakers pass over us.” By this I mean to say that I want to speak into your hearts as well. Let all the crashing waves of our seas’ surface pass right over us, and enter with me into תְּלוּם, our shared deep “undersea” places.

The topic I was asked to discuss here is “Personal Theology.”<sup>1</sup> Because I was originally not given a full description of what was meant by this pregnant phrase, I have been allowing it to roll around in my mind for these past several months, and now I will want to talk about it in several ways, which will hopefully all come together.

First is the need for a rabbi to have his/her own theological stance. In the course of your rabbinic education—hopefully an ongoing process throughout your lives—you encounter many compelling teachers and visions of reality. What do you take from them? What do you reject? What does your own experience as person, as Jew, or as rabbi cause you to question, or perhaps refine in a personal way? What is the unique window into Judaism that you and you alone can offer to a congregant, a seeker, a potential convert? This sorting out of readings, teachings, and positions eventually will coalesce into what may be called a rabbi’s personal theology.

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This article was originally a keynote speech delivered at the CCAR Convention in Boston in 2012.

I would say that this need to have a personal theology, one that I fully endorse, is secondary, however, to another more basic need. That is the need to have a personal religious life. The point may seem obvious, but it is truly not so. Let me spend a bit of time explaining what I mean by the rabbi’s need to have a religious life.

As you all know, we liberal rabbis minister to a highly secularized Jewish community. With the notable exception of some Jews-by-choice, personal piety is not a common phenomenon among those who join our congregations. As you also know, it is especially around the life cycle and the quest for legacy—something to pass on to the next generation—that Jews find themselves turning to rabbis and synagogue communities. The birth of a child, education in the tradition, celebration of life’s milestones, tragic losses of life or misfortune, the aging and illness of parents, death and mourning—all of these bring Jews back from their secular pursuits to seek out wisdom and consolation from their tradition, and the personal support and affection of rabbis and other clergy.

Rabbis are expected to meet Jews in such moments with empathy, drawing on a deep well of caring, having an ability to give and to be present to people with whom they otherwise may have little relationship. At such times the traditional phrases of piety do not suffice, nor does the attempt at purely intellectual teaching. The rabbi has to be seen, above all, as genuine, truly caring, and not merely professional. Indeed “professionalism” at such times can be seen as “slick” or superficial.

The ability to be present as a full human being in such moments can only come out of the rabbi’s own inner religious or spiritual life. To live a life of giving to others, you need to be nourished by God’s presence in your own life. Otherwise your well will quickly run dry. To *hold* people, in their pain as well as in their joy, to pastor in an almost literal sense, you as a rabbi have to be able to draw on a great, indeed endless, reservoir of strength, which is really not your own at all, but God’s, in which you are rooted by your own faith. For a rabbi, cultivating and probing the depths of spiritual life is nothing less than a survival skill.

So teaching students to become rabbis, helping each one grow into his or her own rabbinate, as we like to say it, includes instructing them on how to develop their own inner lives. This includes prayer, both communal and personal. Spiritual direction and counseling also have a place. Continuing all of these throughout your

rabbinate should help keep you open to that reservoir of strength and inspiration. But in our tradition the inner life is also very much nurtured by study of the sources, learned and discussed in open-hearted ways, so that each rabbi's spiritual life is rooted directly in the text and language of the ages. The rabbinate is the Western world's original tradition of lifelong learning. Staying close to Torah as a great font of living waters should be an ongoing source of nurture to our own inner gardens, hence to the rich plantings we can pass on to others. A personal theology is not only a series of positions on key issues, and hence cannot be taught in theology courses alone. Rather it is our reflection on our own inner lives, an attempt to understand where we are, each of us, in our own Jewish growth and what we experience within ourselves, including both the presence and absence of God. A theology divorced from the inner life becomes a barren exercise of mind.

This brings us to a second sense of personal theology. Each of our theologies, whether we realize it or not, is in part an articulation of our own journeys through life, amplified through the medium of tradition's voice. Jewish theology in its most native form is narrative theology. Neither the Torah nor the Talmud articulates a *concept* of God. They tell us stories about the One who called to Abraham, about the One who brought us forth from Egypt, about the One we encountered standing before the mountain. "Do you want to know the One who spoke the world into being?" asks the Talmud. "Then study aggadah: narrative, stories."

We share a common story. We are all Jews. All of us, in each generation, as we recite at the seder, came out of Egypt. To someone who unexpectedly seems close to us, feels like a soul sister, we will say "We must have been standing next to each other at Mount Sinai." (There was, you see, mixed seating, or at least mixed standing, at Sinai.) Not that this is *history*, of course, but that is entirely beside the point. It is *ourstory*. The point is best expressed in Buberian language. It may not be "his-story," in the impersonal third person objective sense, but when turned into first person plural it is "ourstory," and that's what matters. Our shared mythology. "That's our story, and we're stickin' with it!"

But each of us then takes that collective story and makes it our own, individually and uniquely. Yes, you too have come out of Egypt, or need still to come out of Egypt, or, most likely, both. What is the particular *מיצר*, narrow strait, that comprises your

מצרים? With whom can you talk about that? Might you dream of a religious community where you could be challenged to ask—and free to answer—such a personal question? Part of the classic rabbinic definition of a *חבר* in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan's comment on the *הב* *שיגלה לפניו כל מצפוני לבו ועשה לך חבר*, one "before whom you can reveal all the secrets of your heart." That sort of "spiritual friendship" is what my ideal of *חברותה* is really all about.

What is my Egypt? How will I come out of it? I am particularly moved by a comment of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav on the phrase *ובג צדה לא עשו להם*, "They made no provisions for the way." When you're about to leave Egypt, he says, don't stop to ask "But how will I make a living out there?" If you do, you'll never get out.

Another passage: God calls you and says *לך לך*, go forth, for your own sake, following Rashi, or go unto your true self, in the Chasidic reading. But how does that work in my own life? What is my journey? Where will I find my promised land? What if I don't? How many times will I have to go back and forth to the *negev*, that place of dryness, before and even after I get there?

Or another: I am there with Mother Rivka, the first person of whom we are told *ואלהים את לדרוש* ותלך לדרוש. What do I mean by seeking out the One? What is it that am I seeking? What do I want of God?

A personal Jewish theology, a personal engagement with these stories, makes a great demand of us. Such a reading of Torah forces us to confront the most powerful questions of our lives. But that confrontation is not only demanding. It is entirely *intimate* as well. These are questions addressed to our most private self, to the place within us that is deeply hidden from most others, protected by defensive walls, often hidden from our own busy selves most of the time. These personal questions, amplified by the echo-chamber of religious language, are all about *דברים המסורים ללב דברים בין אדם לעצמו*.

This, then, is the second meaning of personal theology. Not just a theology that belongs to you alone, but one that is all about your most intimate and secret inner places. Yes, theology is in that sense a personal enterprise. If I share my theology with you, I am sharing something of my deepest self.

If I have spent a Shabbat at your congregation, you have heard me share my interpretation of your *לכה רודי*. I call it a flirtation song with the *נשמה יתרה*. I do not believe, you see, that the "extra soul"

we have on Shabbat comes floating down from heaven at 3:42 in the winter season or 7:29 in the middle of summer (at least in our Boston climate!). I believe that soul, the most intimate and therefore vulnerable part of ourselves, is there within us all week long. But it is afraid to come out. It fears being trampled by the pace at which we live, shouted down by the loudness of our encounters in the hustle-bustle of ordinary life, of *חול*. But on *ערב שבת* we promise it: "It's all right. You can come out now. I promise, for the next twenty-four hours, to live at a slower pace. No rushing, no fighting, no screaming. No despair over the stock market or the business cycle. I promise not to get depressed by watching politicians on television. It's safe in my Shabbat world; you can come out now." So we say to *her* *נשמח*, anima (in a text originally written by and for men)

... התנערי, מעפר קומי ... רב לך שבת בעמק הבכא ...  
התעוררי התעוררי ... מה שתתחחי ... לא תבושי ולא תכלמי

We say to this vulnerable (hence; feminine) place within the soul: Come out of hiding. Let me, the conscious self, join with you, the hidden soul-self, in this mystical marriage, as God unites with Israel, as heaven unites with newly created earth. Let us all become whole together. Personal theology: a theology of intimacy.

But there is a third meaning of personal theology that we cannot avoid discussing here, and this may be the true heart of our investigation. I refer to the theology of God as divine person. The Personhood of God, to take the title of my teacher Yochanan Muffs's beautiful little book on the subject.<sup>2</sup> In my case, I need to ask what we still mean by such designations, indeed how we can use them at all, once we accept that all our personified images of God may be seen as projections from the human onto the divine. Does such awareness mean a rejection of all such language and its emotional content? If so, where do we go as religious Jews? Is there still an attachment possible to the God-language of our Torah that will make for a sense of continuity? What do we say to the critic who says, as one did upon reading my *Radical Judaism*, that "[his] God bears little or no real relationship to the God of Israel."<sup>3</sup> The fact that the same was said of the Rambam as well as Mordecai Kaplan is of some comfort, but insufficient as a response.

I want to tie this back to our prior elucidations of personal theology and talk about the connection between them. Can one be personal about one's religious life without personifying? Can there be intimacy with a God who remains abstract, even elusive, the God of *אֱלֹהֵי אֲשֶׁר אֱדוּקָה*? Or can we give ourselves permission to personify again in a post-critical mode? If religion is all about that which makes us human, how can we invoke the notion of *צַלַּם אֱלֹהִים* without falling back into a religious language that does not reflect what we really believe?

If this talk sounds more like a *שיעור* in selected texts than a lecture, you will understand the way I seek to do Jewish theology. I read the sources from within, weaving them together and seeking to stretch them, to make them open enough to embrace the meaning I find within them, rather than applying them to a structure that comes from without. In this (as in some other matters) I am a devotee of the *Zohar* rather than the Rambam, R. Nachman of Bratzlav rather than Moses Mendelssohn or Hermann Cohen, Heschel rather than Kaplan. I fully acknowledge that I am "working" the sources, seeking to pull them in the direction I want them to go. But I have come to understand that in the course of that intense engagement I am giving them the power to "work" me as well. Pulling the tradition in my own direction is an act of engagement, one in which I of necessity make myself vulnerable to being pulled as well. As a *darshan*, you do not work the cold magic of interpretation on inanimate sources to make them say what you want. You rather engage with tradition as a living body, either as Jacob wrestling with the angel or as the troubadour suitor of that maiden high in the tower who, according to the *Zohar*, reveals her face only to the one who truly loves her. We wrest meaning from the text in a struggle that is also an act of love. Indeed I sometimes wonder about Jacob, supposedly the most beautiful human since Adam, and that all-nighter with the angel, twin, or alter ego. Wrestling or making love? Are we sure we know where the border lies? Straddling that border between wrestling and lovemaking defines our relationship with the tradition, maybe even with God.

One of my current favorite *p'sukim* of the Torah comes up in a surprising place, the end of *פרשת תצוה*, Exodus 29:46:

וידעו כי אני ה' אלהים אשר הוצאתי אותם  
מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לִשְׁכֹּנֵי בְתוּכֵם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

Read in the Chasidic mode: Whatever Egypt you have come out of, you have been brought forth by God. Realize that! You have been liberated from that מצור, that constraint, narrowing, or squeeze—even if it was the squeeze of unhealthy religion—because God seeks you out as a dwelling-place. Know that your freedom has come about to give you the opportunity to fashion your life as a משכן, a home for the שכינה (Of course בתוכם is read as משש בתוכם, not just “in their midst,” but within each of them.)

Yet the Psalmist says לנו ברוך ה' אלהינו. You have been a dwelling-place for us in each generation. This is one of the verses quoted when the Rabbis say הוּא מְקוּמָנוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם וְאִין הָעוֹלָם מְקוּמָנוּ. We dwell within God, are surrounded by God, rather than the other way around.

Can both of these be true? Can we fashion and be God's dwelling while we also dwell within God? As rational propositions, it would seem not. The law of contradictions would seem to apply. Either we dwell in God or God dwells in us. But in experiential terms, these two only represent different modes of religious experience: the One who seems to embrace us and surround us from without, becoming our dwelling, and the One that wells up from within, seeking a home within our heart, are the same One.

פתח לי שערי צדק אבוא כם אודה י-ה

Open the gates for me, that I may come in to praise the Lord. Open the gates for me, that I may come in to praise the Lord. Open the gate for us as it is about to close! Like Kafka's Joseph K. in “Before the Law,” we stand before the gates, needing to call upon God, or upon someone, to let us in.

קול דודי דופק פתחי לי

The sound of my Beloved knocking, “Open up for me!” We are the ones with our doors shut; it is we who have to open them to let God in.

קמתי אני לפתוח לדודי

I need to rise up myself, of my own accord, קמתי, to open for my Beloved.

Can both be true? Can I stand before a closed gate while at the same time having my own door locked to the One who is knocking,

seeking to come in? Logical contradiction has no place here; we are seeing the same experience from two angles, both of which are psychologically and spiritually quite real.

Those of you who grew up in traditional synagogues will remember one of my very favorite liturgical texts, אנעים ומדות, שיר הכבוד, something I much miss in modern prayer books. I love it because, after due apologies, it's the most blatantly pagan Jewish text I know. A part of that apologetic introduction, referring to the prophets, reads:

דימו אותך ולא  
כפי ישך וישוּך לפי מעשך  
המשליך ריב חזיונות וְגו' אחד בכל הדמויות

In Israel Zangwill's classic translation:

They told of Thee, but not as Thou must be.  
Since from Thy work they tried to body Thee.  
To countless visions did their pictures run,  
Behold through all the visions Thou art one.

יחוו כך זקנה ונחורו ושער ראשך כשיבה ושחורו  
זקנה ביים דין ונחורו ביים קרב כאיש מלחמת ידיו לו רב

In Thee old age and youth at once were drawn,  
The grey of old, the flowing locks of dawn.  
The ancient judge, the youthful warrior,  
The man of battles, terrible in war.

The poem is based on a series of midrashim claiming Israel saw God twice: at the Reed Sea God appeared to them as a youth, while at Sinai they saw God as an elder. The context determines the way God is seen. Who wants to be led in battle by a tottering old God? But who wants to receive law and wisdom from a young whippersnapper of a deity? Some versions of this trope fashion it around the Torah's ראו עתה כי אני הוא ואין אלהים עמדי (Deut. 32:39). Why is אני repeated? Just because you see multiple visions, do not think that I am more than one. כבני היא בני. 4

Can the same God be both זקן and בנור? But of course! These are different spiritual moments, each with its own needs, like building a משכן while we dwell within God, like standing before the gate while we ourselves are the closed door.

The midrash is cautious in its language: . . . נראה . . . “appeared.” Is the change in God or in them? This would seem to make all the difference. Are we talking about grand-scale supernaturalism, the greatest miracle of revelation, that God can know what each heart and each moment needs, then change appearance accordingly? Or are we simply saying that all our images of God are human projections, reflections of our own need?

תיקן. There is no answer to that question. As in our previous examples, both are true at once. Yes, God creates us in the divine image. Yes, all our images of God are our projected creation. There is a kaleidoscopic hall of mirrors here, but you can look into this kaleidoscope from either end.

Referring to the visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel, our Sages said גודל כוחן של נביאים שמדמין צורה לייצרה “Great is the power of the prophets, who liken the human form to its Creator” (*Tanchuma Chukat* 6; *B’midbar Rabbah* 19:3). But that’s not really what the prophets were doing! In their most intense visionary moments—Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1—they were in fact likening the *divine* form to that of man. But that was perhaps too much for the Sages to acknowledge. So they said it backwards. But the point is that in depicting God in human form, we are uplifting the human rather than diminishing the Divine. Yes, the hall of mirrors can be opened from either end.

Can we try it this way? *We are created in the image of God and we are obliged to return the favor.*

Let me turn to yet another favorite midrash (*B’reishit Rabbah* 17:4): *YHVH* asks Adam to name the animals. You recall that the creation of humans did not win much favor with the angels, apparently God’s unchallenged favorites until then. But God said to them, “Look how smart this new human is! At that, God paraded a series of four-footed creatures across the stage. “What are these?” the divine voice asked. Having no part of the world of flesh and blood, the angels were dumbfounded. Then God asked Adam, “What’s this one? What’s this?” Adam blithely replied, “This is called a dog. This is called a cat.” “And what should you be called?” God asks. Adam replies, “I should be called Adam, earthling, because I was taken from *adamah*.” “And what should I be called?” God asks.

Now this is the great moment. The human is being asked to name the Divine, to give *YHVH*, breathy abstraction itself, an identity, a way of being known, becoming manifest in the human

realm. Adam could have said *anything*. But without missing a beat, he says לך ראי ליקרא אדוני כי אדון אתה על כל מעשיך. “You should be called Lord, for You are lord over all your works.” It is we, in other words, who have set up the master/servant relationship with the Divine, clearly a projection from human society. Why? Because that was what we needed: someone before whom to bow, to whose authority to submit. It was not that God needed—or needs—to be מלך; it was rather we who needed to be עבדים.

Do you see what I’m doing here? I’m suggesting a theology that sees through the personal, understands that it is all metaphor, and yet remains affectionately bound to it. Demythologize and remythologize. Both the Rambam and the *Zohar* understood that the reality of *YHVH* lies beyond all description in human terms. Maimonides chose the apophatic path: saying less about God is saying more. Purify your theological language, attempt to come as close as you can to the abstract truth. Get rid of myth. The *Zohar*, recognizing the same truth and inadequacy of language, takes the opposite strategy. Drown them in metaphor! Make *everything* a metaphor. Of course God is an elder on the throne—Daniel saw Him that way! But so too is God mother, warrior, sun and moon, fountain and river, myrtle branch and *etrog*, bridegroom and bride. With so much metaphor, and with the metaphors switching back and flowing together at every moment, you couldn’t possibly freeze a single one of them and mistake it for *the* truth. Dress the mystery of *YHVH* up in an endless variety of mythic garments of glory.

I recognize that this series of human metaphors is the Rabbis’ way—our way—of giving texture to the intimacy of religious experience. Personal theology requires that. Religious experience, taking us to our most intimate and vulnerable places, demands a language that can speak to our human, all-too-human self. Nothing less than the language of person will do. *We give to God the greatest gift we know how to give: that of our humanity.*

I proceed with lessons from two Abraham Joshua Heschels, both having very much to do with this sense of personal theology. The first is from the Apter Rav, Professor Heschel’s ancestor, the founder of the line. On Deuteronomy’s (10:12) מה ה' אלהיך שואל מעיך—What does *YHVH* your God ask of you?—he noted that the word מה is numerically 45. So too is the word אדם. The simpler Chasidim, when they heard this, must have understood him to be saying: God wants you to be a *mensch*.

But to his closer disciples—one of them quotes this in his name—he said that he was referring to the Adam of Ezekiel's vision. *הוא מלמעלה עליו כמראה אדם* An image like that of man was upon the chariot. What does God want of you? Adam! That is the Adam God wants of you—that you place the image of man atop the chariot.<sup>5</sup> Yes, projection is a mitzvah.

His great-great-grandson, surely not by coincidence, published a book of poems entitled *שם המפורש דער מענטש—Man: the Divine Name*. The greatest lesson I learned from Heschel, with whom I had the privilege of studying quite closely, came as *פא שבעל פה* "Why," I heard him ask, "is the Torah seemingly so obsessed with the problem of graven images?" If (with the Maimonideans) you believe it is because God has no image, then all these images are merely errors. But why, then, is idolatry such a great sin? The point, he said, is that God indeed *does* have an image. You, a human being, are God's image. You cannot *make* God's image; you can only *be* God's image. The medium in which you need to do that encompasses the canvas of your entire life. To take anything less than a full living, breathing person and declare it God's image *את הדמות את למעט*, to diminish God's image in the world. That is the true sin of idolatry.

You will have noticed, since I have been quoting old Rabbinic and Chasidic sources, that all the varied images until now are those of males. But of course there need to be female images as well, and not just because it is politically correct to say so. I am a disciple of Ben Azzai, who told his friend Rabbi Akiva that he had a greater principle on which to base the Torah than "Love your neighbor as yourself." Ben Azzai's *גדול כלל* was Genesis 5:1-2, *זה ספר תולדות אדם . . . בדמות אלהים עשה אותו זכר ונקבה בראם* "This Torah is the book of human generations . . . as they—or we—were made in God's image, created male and female." (We don't know, of course, where Ben Azzai meant to end that proof-text, but I insist on reading him this way.)

Yes, this means that men and women are both equally created in God's image. But I take it to mean more than that: All of us, created in God's image, are both male and female. *זכר ונקבה בראם* (ברא אותם). Read not: "He created them all, male and female," but: "He created them all male and female!" Feminine images of the deity are not needed only by women. In the deeper spirit of third-wave feminism, all of us are both male and female, and we respond to images of both genders in complex and subtle ways.

The kabbalists were masters of the subtle use of this gender-based complexity. That is one of the things I learn from them, though adapting it to our very different egalitarian values. Among the clusters of symbols (*s'frot*) that constitute the heart of kabbalistic language, none is as fully developed as that of the tenth, called *מלכות שכינה* or *כנסת ישראל*. The mystics have built upon a well-known Rabbinic designation for the indwelling God, *שכינה*, that happens to be grammatically feminine, but is nowhere in the old Rabbinic sources described in female terms. In identifying her with *שכינת ישראל*, an idealized representation of the Jewish people, long described in *מדרשים* on *השירים* as the bride of God, they create a female hypostasis, a divine entity that is part of the one indivisible God (they insist on their monotheism, after all!), and yet longs for Him, goes into exile with Israel, weeps for Her children in the persona of Rachel or Jerusalem, and all the rest. She stands in a liminal place between the upper and lower worlds. When seen from above, from the viewpoint of the mysterious One, She is purely receptive, receiving the flow of divine blessing like an empty receptacle, the sea into whom all the rivers flow, the moon receiving the light of the sun. But when seen from below, from our earthly perspective, She is *כל הי אה*, compassionate mother of all life, God as sustainer and nurturer, the One through whom all blessings flow. It is not accidental that this transformative development in Jewish theology took place in thirteenth-century Christian Spain. My article on the subject is entitled "*Shekhinah*, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs."<sup>6</sup> That tells you a great deal, but for our purposes it is just a long historical footnote. I celebrate the fact that Judaism has been enriched through contact with other traditions.

The real meaning of "male" and "female" in kabbalistic language is what they call *משיב* and *מקבל*, giver and receiver, so-called active and passive partners, to use the metaphor of human sexuality, but those terms are hardly adequate. As lovers, we know that we are all both givers and receivers, indeed that our own greatest pleasure may lie in giving to the other in ways that entirely blur the clarity of who is giving and who is receiving. Let us not be too embarrassed or prudish to learn from that lesson. It is true in other forms of love as well, including our love relationship with God, as the kabbalists insist.

We human creatures are receivers, and we need to recognize that. God blows the breath of life into Adam's nostrils, an act

that is repeated in each birth, indeed in each moment, with every breath we take. Life is a gift; *YHVH*, נשמת כל חי, the breath of all life, is משפיע and we are all מקבלים. This is the usual midrash on the שיר השירים. Gratitude is the beginning of religious consciousness.

But that is only the first step. The purpose of Kabbalah is to turn us all into משפיעים, givers. The true goal of religious awareness, of our inward journey, is to awaken and activate the source of divinity within the self, the God who is immanent within our souls. Gratitude leads us toward this inner awakening, the discovery of our פנימיות, longing to be joined to her source in the mysterious beyond of *YHVH*. Bringing out and cultivating this inner point, making it the object of the way we live, fashioning our lives after it, is all part of what it means to be a religious person. It is *personal theology*! In the interpersonal domain, רשות הרבים, especially, this means discovering that generosity of spirit is our true natural state. There are psychological studies to back this up, but we know it as religious people; it is a truth revealed to us. We are here to become givers. We are obliged to give back, to the human community as a whole as well as to all the more specific communities—including the Jewish community—that have made us who we are, that have blessed us with all the material and cultural gifts we have received. This sense of becoming a giver recaptures and provides a much-needed spiritual foundation for the entire agenda of עלינו תיקון, in which the Reform Movement has shown such great leadership. Those of you who know and read me are aware that I am a strong supporter of that agenda. I accept no either/or between the revival of Jewish spirituality and our understanding that we are judged by our worldly deeds. But also in the spiritual domain, רשות היחיד, there is a way of giving back to the One who gives us life. That has to do with the mystery of כוונה, the direction of our spiritual energies. Life, like breathing, is a great circle. We receive; we give back. כל הנשמה תחלל י-ה, every breath goes back to *Yod Hei*, the highest divine name, the deepest inner divine place, which is also חי נשמת כל, ever breathing that breath back out into us, renewing the first breath of life. In a startling reading of the well-known Hallel verse (Ps. 118:23), the Maggid of Mezritch declares נפלאות בעינינו, turned into a *zot*, a female, a receiver. How wondrous in our eyes!<sup>77</sup> Yes, we are capable of giving; God is capable of receiving our blessing.

Here we have arrived at the fourth and final way in which theology is personal, the one that unites them all. God looks into us and finds a mirror, divinity reflected back, offered by each of us in our own unique way. For those of you who know my favorite Rabbi Nachman story,<sup>78</sup> each of us brings back our own portrait of the king. We embody the divine persona. I do not fear incarnational language, as long as it is about all of us, not just one of us. We are the image of God because we contain a font of divinity, flowing forth from within, to be a reflection of God's presence in the world. In us the divine מוקד חיים is inexorably attached to דם, בשר הדם, a fact that makes us subject to terrible temptations, but also leads to the greatest exaltation of the divine/human spirit, the ultimate moment of *personal theology*.

### Notes

1. In the gap between the oral and written versions of this essay, I note that the recently appeared *Festschrift* for Neil Gillman is also (and most appropriately!) entitled *Personal Theology* (Boston: Academic Press, 2013). My article there, "A Neo-Hasidic Credo," may be seen as a companion to this piece.
2. Yochanan Muffs, *The Personhood of God: Biblical Theology, Human Faith and the Divine Image* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005).
3. Daniel Landes, "Hidden Master," in the *Jewish Review of Books* 3 (2010). See my response to him and our ensuing correspondence in the *Jewish Review of Books* 4 (2011) and the online forum *Jewschool* (<http://jewschool.com/2011/03/04/25656/the-greenlandes-debate-continues/>).
4. See my article on this series of midrashim, "The Children in Egypt and the Theophany at the Sea," *Judaism* 96 (1975): 446–56.
5. Quoted by Zvi Hirsch of Zydaczow in 'Ateret Zevi, *parashat aharey mot*.
6. "Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol in its Historical Context," *AJS Review* 26 (2002): 1–52.
7. Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, ed., *Maggid Devaran le-Ya'akov*, ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1976), 76.
8. I discuss it in *Tormented Master* (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1979), 355–60. It also serves as the Introduction to *Seek My Face* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2003). I have recently had a third opportunity to reflect on it in Roei Horen, ed., *Ha-Hayyim ke-Ga'agu'a* (Tel Aviv: Yedi'ot, 2010), 91–99 [Hebrew].

## Call for Papers: *Maayanot*

*The CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly* is committed to serving its readers' professional, intellectual, and spiritual needs. In pursuit of that objective, the *Journal* created a new section known as *Maayanot* (Primary Sources), which made its debut in the Spring 2012 issue.

We continue to welcome proposals for *Maayanot*—translations of significant Jewish texts, accompanied by an introduction as well as annotations and/or commentary. *Maayanot* aims to present fresh approaches to materials from any period of Jewish life, including but not confined to the biblical or Rabbinic periods. When appropriate, it is possible to include the original document in the published presentation.

Please submit proposals, inquiries, and questions to *Maayanot* editor, Daniel Polish, [dpolish@optonline.net](mailto:dpolish@optonline.net).

Along with submissions for *Maayanot*, the *Journal* encourages the submission of scholarly articles in fields of Jewish Studies, as well as other articles that fit within our Statement of Purpose.

*The CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly*  
Published quarterly by the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

Volume LXI, No. 2. Issue Number: Two hundred forty.  
Spring 2014

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The *CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly* (ISSN 1058-8760) is published quarterly by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, 355 Lexington Avenue, 18th Floor, New York, NY, 10017. Application to mail at periodical postage rates is pending at New York, NY and at additional mailing offices.

Subscriptions should be sent to CCAR Executive Offices, 355 Lexington Avenue, 18th Floor, New York, NY, 10017. Subscription rate as set by the Conference is \$100 for a one-year subscription, \$150 for a two-year subscription. Overseas subscribers should add \$36 per year for postage. POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to *CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly*, c/o Central Conference of American Rabbis, 355 Lexington Avenue, 18th Floor, New York, NY, 10017.

Typesetting and publishing services provided by Publishing Synthesis, Ltd., 39 Crosby Street, New York, NY, 10013.

The *CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly* is indexed in the *Index to Jewish Periodicals*. Articles appearing in it are listed in the *Index of Articles on Jewish Studies* (of *Kirjath Sepher*).

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ISSN 1058-8760

ISBN: 978-0-88123-213-4



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