

SPECIAL SECTION: GOD AND THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The idea that our understanding of God transforms as we transform and grow as individuals and as a species has deep roots in contemporary theology in the Jewish and Christian worlds. Jewish thinkers put it this way: the God of Moses (the one who led us out of Egypt) is not the God of Moses Maimonides (the great Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages). Yet these ideas have yet to penetrate popular consciousness and reshape the way the majority of Christians and Jews think about, worship, and serve God. Nor have the “new atheists” responded to much of this thinking of the past two hundred years—they prefer to attack the more ancient and hence more easily ridiculed versions of religious thought. So when Art Green—my former schoolmate at Temple B'nai Abraham in Newark, New Jersey, and at the Jewish Theological Seminary, who has become one of America's most respected Jewish thinkers and has been a member of our editorial board since *Tikkun* began in 1986—sent me the manuscript of his forthcoming book *Radical Judaism*, I asked him if we could use some excerpts to start a new discussion about God for our readers. We then asked some of the world's most significant and creative religious thinkers to tell us how they understand God. I hope you'll read and respond not only to Art Green, but also to the other thinkers who have miraculously kept their pieces to the short amount of space we offered them! Please send responses to letters@tikkun.org. If you'd like to share your ideas about God or respond to the perspectives presented in this section, we'll try to post them in the letters section at www.tikkun.org.

—Rabbi Michael Lerner

SACRED EVOLUTION

A Radical Jewish Perspective on God and Science

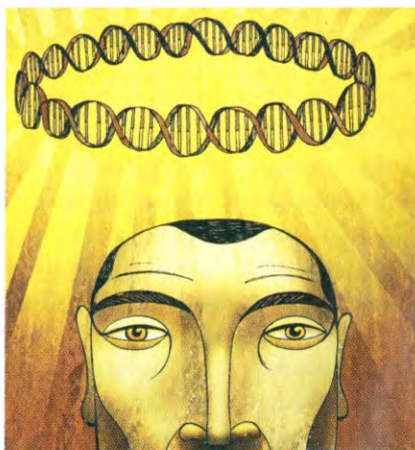
by Arthur Green

OPEN 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 narratives, memories, and images that so preoccupy the mind of religious traditions, including our own. We Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all over-involved with proclaiming—or questioning—the truth of our own particular stories. Did Moses really receive the Torah from God at Mount Sinai? Did Jesus truly rise from the tomb? Was Muhammad indeed God's chosen messenger? We refine our debates about these forever, each group certain as to its own narrative's place as the center of universal history. In the modern world, where all these tales are challenged, we work out sophisticated and non-literalist ways of proclaiming our faith in them. But there is a *bigger* story, infinitely bigger, and one that we all share. How did we get here, we humans, and where are we going? For more than a century and a half, educated Westerners have understood that this is the tale of evolution. But we religious folk, the great tale-tellers of our respective traditions, have been guarded and cool toward this story and have hesitated to make it our own. The time has come to embrace it and

to uncover its sacred dimensions.

I believe that “Creation,” or perhaps more neutrally stated, “Origins,” a topic almost entirely neglected in both Jewish and liberal Christian theology of the last century, must return as a central preoccupation in our own day. Yes, this does have much to do with the ecological agenda and the key role that religion needs to play in changing our attitudes toward the environment and resources amid which we humans live. But it also emerges from the growing

acceptance in our society of scientific explanations—those of the nuclear physicist, the geologist, the evolutionary biologist, and others, for the origins of the world we have inherited. The finality of this acceptance, which I share, seemingly means the end of a long struggle between so-called scientific and religious worldviews. This leaves those of us who still speak the language of faith in a peculiar situation. Is there then no connection between the God we know and encounter daily within all existence and the emergence and history of our universe? Does the presence of eternity we feel (whether we call ourselves “religious” or not) when we stand atop great mountains or at the ocean water's edge exist only within our minds? Is our faith nothing more than one of those big mollusk



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shells we used to put up against our ears, convinced we could hear in them the ocean's roar? Is our certainty of divine presence, so palpable to the religious soul, *merely* a poetic affirmation, corresponding to nothing in the reality described by science? Yes, we accept the scientific account of how we got here, or at least understand that the conversation about that process and its stages lies within the domain of science. Yet we cannot absent God from it entirely. Even if we have left behind the God of childhood, the One who assures and guarantees, the presence of divinity within nature remains essential to our perception of reality. A God who has no place in this process is a God who begins in the human mind, a mere *idea* of God, a post-Kantian construct created to guarantee morality, to assure us of the potential for human goodness, or for some other noble purpose. But that is not God. The One of which I speak here indeed goes back to origins and stands prior to them, though perhaps not in a clearly temporal sense. A God who underlies all being, who *is* and *dwells within* (rather than "who controls" or "oversees") the evolutionary process is the One about which or—"whom"—we tell the great sacred story, the story of existence.

I thus insist on the centrality of "Creation," but I do so from the position of one who is not quite a theist, as understood in the classical Western sense. I do not affirm a Being or a Mind that exists separate from the universe and acts upon it intelligently and willfully. This puts me quite far from the contemporary "Creationists" or from what is usually understood as "Intelligent Design" (but see more on this below). My theological position is that of a *mystical pantheist*, one who believes that God is present throughout all of existence, that Being or Y-H-W-H underlies and unifies all that is. At the same time (and this is pantheism as distinct from pantheism), this whole is mysteriously and infinitely greater than the sum of its parts, and cannot be fully known or reduced to its constituent beings. "Transcendence" in the context of such a faith does not refer to a God "out there" or "over there" somewhere beyond the universe, since I do not know the existence of such a "there." Transcendence means rather that God—or Being—is so fully present in the here-and-now of each moment that we could not possibly grasp the depth of that presence. Transcendence thus dwells *within* immanence. There is no ultimate duality here, no "God and world," no "God, world, and self," but only one Being and its many faces. Those who seek consciousness of it come to know that it is indeed

Ein Sof, without end. There is no end to its unimaginable depth, but so too there is no border, no limit, separating that unfathomable One from anything that is. Infinite Being in every instant flows through all finite beings. "Know this day and set it upon your heart that Y-H-W-H is *elohim* (Deut. 4:39)"—that God within you *is* the transcendent. And the verse concludes: "There is nothing else."

By *mystical pantheism* I mean that this underlying oneness of being is accessible to human experience and reveals itself to humans—indeed it reveals itself everywhere, always—as the deeper levels of the human mind become open to it. Access to it requires a lifting of veils, a shifting of attention to those inner realms of human consciousness where mystics, and not a few poets, have always chosen to abide. The "radical otherness" of God, so insisted upon by Western theology, is not an ontological otherness, but an *otherness of perspective*. To open one's eyes to God is to see Being—the only Being there is—in a radically different way. Such a unitive view of reality is *entirely other* from the way we usually see things, yet it is the same reality that is being viewed. I am also one who knows that religious truth belongs to the language of poetry, not discursive prose. I recognize fully and without regret that theology is an art, not a science. We people of faith have nothing we can prove; attempts to do so only diminish what we have to offer. We can only testify, but never prove. Our strength lies in grandeur of vision, in an ability

to transport the conversation about existence and origins to a deeper plane of thinking. My faith, but also my human experience, tells me that this shift profoundly enhances our understanding of our own lives and of the world in which we live. Opening our minds, and ultimately the mind of our society, to the truth accessible from that inner "place" constitutes our best hope for inspiring change in the way we live on this earth. There is nothing *mere* about poetic vision.

This point in the discussion calls for a greater clarification of the terms "One," "Being," and "God," which I now appear to be using quite interchangeably. Am I speaking of a "what" or a "who," the reader has a right to ask. When I refer to "God," I mean the inner force of existence itself, that of which one might say, "Being *is*." I refer to it as the "One" because it is the single unifying substratum of all that is. To speak of Being as a religious person, however, is to speak of it not detachedly, in scientific "objectivity," but rather with full engagement of the self, in *love* and *awe*. These two great



emotions together characterize the religious mind and, when carried to their fullest, make for our sense of the holy. A religious person is one who perceives or experiences holiness in the encounter with existence; the forms of religious life are intended to evoke this sense of the holy. In a mental state that cannot be fully described in words, such a person *hears* Being say, "I am." All of our personifications of the One are in response to that inner "hearing."

In biblical language, the "I am" of Sinai is already there behind the first "Let there be" of Genesis. Creation *is* revelation, as the kabbalists so well understood. To say it in more neutral terms, we religious types choose to *personify* Being because we see ourselves as *living in relationship* to the underlying One. I seek to *respond* to the "I am" that I have been privileged to hear, to place myself at its service in carrying forth this great mission of the evolving life-process. To do so, I choose to personify, to call Being by this ancient name "God." In doing so, I am proclaiming my love and devotion to Being, my readiness to live a life of seeking and responding to its truth. But implied here also is a faith that in some mysterious way Being *loves me*, that it rejoices for a fleeting instant in dwelling within me, delighting in this unique form that constitutes my existence, as it delights in each of its endlessly diverse manifestations.

Creation: Reframing the Tale

WITH REGARD TO "CREATION," I UNDERSTAND THE TASK OF THE theologian to be one of *reframing*, accepting the accounts of origins and natural history offered by the scientific consensus, but helping us to view them in a different way, one that may guide us toward a more profound appreciation of that same reality. The tale of life's origins and development, including its essential building block of natural selection, is well-known to us as moderns. But what would it mean to recount that tale with our eyes truly open?

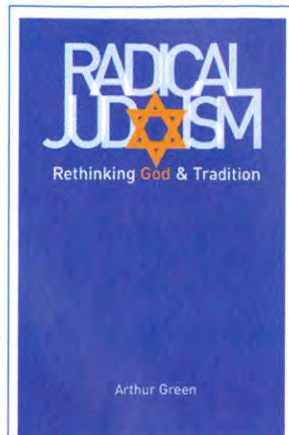
We would understand the entire course of evolution, from the simplest life-forms millions of years ago, to the great complexity of the human brain (still now only barely understood), and proceeding onward into the unknown future, to be a *meaningful* process. It is a place—perhaps even *the* place—where the sacred waits to be discovered. There is a One that reveals itself to us within and behind the great diversity of life. That One is Being itself, the constant in the endlessly changing evolutionary parade. Viewed from our end of the process, the search that leads to such discovery of that One is our human quest for meaning. But turned around, seen from the perspective of the constantly evolving life-energy, evolution can be seen as an ongoing process of *revelation* or self-manifestation. We discover; it reveals. It reveals; we discover. As the human mind advances (from our point of view), understanding more of the structure, process, and history of the ever-evolving One, we are being *given* (from its point of view) ever greater insight into who we are and how we got here.

This ongoing self-disclosure is the result of a deep and mysterious inner drive, the force of Being directed from within, however imperfectly and stumblingly, to manifest itself ever more fully, in

ever more diverse, complex, and interesting ways. That has caused it to bring about, in the long and slow course of its evolution, the emergence of a mind that can reflect upon the process, articulate it, and strive toward the life of complete awareness that will fulfill its purpose. Here on this smallish planet in the middle of an otherwise undistinguished galaxy, something so astonishing has taken place that it indeed demands to be called by the biblical term "miracle," rather than by the Greco-Latin "nature," even though the two are pointing to the exact same set of facts. The descendents of one-celled creatures grew and developed, emerged onto dry land, learned survival skills, and developed language and thought, until a subset of them could reflect on the nature of this entire process and seek to derive meaning from it.

The coming to be of "higher" or more complex forms of life, and eventually of humanity, is not brought about by the specific and conscious planning of what is sometimes called "intelligent design." But neither is it random and therefore inherently without meaning. It is rather the result of an inbuilt movement within the whole of being, the underlying dynamism of existence *striving to be manifest* ever more fully in minds that it brings forth and inhabits, through the emergence of increasingly complex and reflective selves. I think of that underlying One in immanent terms, a being or life force that dwells *within* the universe and all its forms, rather than a Creator from beyond who forms a world that is "other" and separate from its own Self. This One—the only One that truly is—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 Hebrew name Y-H-W-H indicates) clothed in each individual being and encompassing them all.

If we could learn to view our bio-history this way, the incredible grandeur of the evolutionary journey would immediately unfold before us. We Jews revere the memory of one Nahshon ben Aminadav, the first person to step into the Sea of Reeds after Israel left Egypt. The sea did not split, the story goes, until he was up to his neck in water. What courage! But what about the courage of the first creature *ever* to emerge from sea onto dry land? Do we appreciate the magnificence of *that* moment? Or the first to fly, to take wing into the air? Or the moment (of course each of these involves a long, slow process rather than a "moment," but the drama is no less great) when animals were divided from plants, when one sort of being was able to take nourishment directly from the soil while another was able to exist without it, developing the mechanism to "feed" on plant, and then animal, life. How is it possible, with all of them descending from the same single-celled creatures?



This article combines the first chapter of Arthur Green's forthcoming book, *Radical Judaism*, with its introduction, here titled "My Own Roots and Beginnings."

The incredibly complex *interplay* of forces and the thick web of mutual dependency among beings are no less amazing than the distance traversed in this long evolutionary journey. The interrelationship of soil, plants, and insects, or that between climate, foliage, and animal life, leave us breathless as we begin to contemplate them. Yes, it is these very intricacies and complexities that have led the fundamentalists to hold fast to the claim that there must be a greater intelligence behind it all, that such complexity can only reflect the planning of a supernatural Mind. But they miss the point of the religious moment here. Our task as religious persons is not to offer counter-scientific *explanations* for the origin of life. Our task is to *notice*, to pay attention to, the incredible wonder of it all, and to find and praise God in that moment of paying attention.

Yes, there is something “supernatural” about existence, something entirely out of the ordinary, beyond any easy expectation. But I understand the “supernatural” to reside wholly *within* the natural. The difference between them is one of perception, the degree to which our “inner eye” is open. The whole journey is indeed a supernatural one, not because some outside Being made it happen, but because Being itself—residing in those simplest and most ancient of life-forms, pushing ever forward, step after simple step, to reach where we are today—continues to elude our complete understanding. The emergence of both bees and blossoms, and the relationship between them, took place over millions of years, step by evolutionary step. How could that have happened? There is an endless ingenuity to this self-manifesting Being, an endless stream of creativity of which we are only the tiniest part. If we do not destroy or do too much irreversible damage to our planet, it will continue to bring forth ever more diverse and creative manifestations of being, long after we are gone.

The poetic reframing of our contemporary tale of origins that I am proposing here might be better understood by reference to a prior example, one with which we happen to have an intimate bond. I refer to the opening chapter of the Hebrew Bible. The authors of Genesis 1 effected a remarkable transformation of the creation myth that existed in their day. The common theology of the ancient Near East, reflected in both Canaanite and Mesopotamian sources, featured the rising up of the primal forces of chaos, represented by Yam or Tiamat, gods of the sea, against the order being imposed by the younger but more powerful sky gods. The defeat of that primordial rebellion was the background of creation; earth was established upon the carcasses of the vanquished. That tale of uprising and its bloody end, now largely forgotten, was well known to the biblical writers and their audiences. It is reflected in various passages in the prophets, Psalms, and Job, and is subtly hinted at even within the Genesis narrative. But those who wrote Genesis 1 reframed the story completely. Everything was created in harmony, willfully, by a single God who kept saying: “Good! Good!” in response to His creations, giving His blessing to each.

That reshaped tale helped to form and sustain Western civilization for several thousand years. The faith that God loves and

affirms Creation provides the moral undergirding for all of Western religion, manifest differently in each of three faiths. Some believed it naively and literally; others interpreted it and tried to reconcile it with various other ways of thinking. I am suggesting that we need to undertake a similar effort of transformation for our current “Creation” story. Our civilization has been transformed in the last century and a half in no small part by our acceptance of a new series of tales of origin, an account that begins with the Big Bang (which itself may turn out to be myth) and proceeds through the long saga of the origins of our solar system, the geo-history of our planet, the emergence of life, and biological evolution. Nuclear physicists and cosmologists have become the new kabbalists of our age, speculating in ever more refined ways on the first few seconds of existence, much as our mystical sages meditated on the highest triad of the ten divine emanations. The picture science offers is one of unimaginably violent explosion, of particles hurtling through indescribably vast reaches of space, and only then of the incredible emergence of an order—solar systems, gravity, orbits, air, and water—that makes for the possibility of life’s existence. As living things emerge and develop we again are presented with a tale of violent and bloody struggle, that of each species and creature to eat and not be eaten, to strive for its moment at the top of the evolutionary mound of corpses. This story too, I am suggesting, is in need of reformulation by a new and powerful harmonistic vision, one that will allow even the weakest and most threatened of creatures a legitimate place in this world and will call upon us not to wipe it out by careless whim. This is the role of today’s religion.

How would such a reframed tale read? It would be a narrative of the great reaching out by the inner One that inhabits each of us and binds us all together, a constant stretching forth of Y-H-W-H (“Being”) in the adventure of becoming HWYH (Hebrew for “being” or “existence”), or of the One garbing itself in the multi-colored garment of diversity and multiplicity. Every creature and each cell within it would be viewed as part of this tale, a mini-adventure within the infinitely complex narrative web that embraces us all. The meaning of this great journey would remain quite mysterious, but with a glimmer of hope that somewhere in the distant future “we” might figure it all out. The evolutionary movement forward would be seen as a striving toward complexity, toward ever-thicker and ever-richer patterns of self-manifestation.

Does this One know where it is going? Here I come trickily close to, yet remain distinct from, the Intelligent Design advocates as they are usually understood. On the one hand, I do not attribute human-like consciousness to the One. There is no “plan” of Creation, no sense that humans are the apex or final goal of the process. I do not believe that the complexity or intricacy of the natural order is *evidence* of such design. As I said, we religious folk have no evidence, only testimony. Any attempt to claim otherwise only confuses the picture. On the other hand, however, it is fair to say that all of mind and consciousness ever to exist are part of the One. Mystics have always understood that this One transcends time, as the name Y-H-W-H itself indicates. All minds are thus one



with Mind, as all beings are contained within Being. In this sense we can say that the fullness of Being's self-manifestation, including our understanding of it, is there from the start, not in the sense of active or intentional foreknowledge, but as potential that is ever unfolding. The One "knows" all because the One *is* all, all that ever was, is, and will be, in an undivided Self.

The reader who is aware of Jewish mystical language will understand that this work is a rereading of contemporary evolutionary theory in the light of kabbalistic thought. Kabbalah understands all of existence as eternally pouring forth from *chochmah*, primordial Wisdom or Mind. *Chochmah* is the primal point of existence, symbolized by the Hebrew letter *yod*, which is itself hardly more than a dot. This point, infinitesimally small, is the proverbial "little that contains a lot." Within it lies the entire unfolding of existence, every stage in the evolutionary journey, every plant and animal as it will live, reproduce (or not) and die, all of humanity and all that lies beyond us in the distant future. It all exists in a literal sense of *potential* (meaning that its potency, its power, is all fully present) in that primal point. In our contemporary language, that point is the instant of the Big Bang, the moment that contains the energy of existence in all its intensity. From there it flows forward into existence, garbing or "actualizing" itself at each stage in endless forms of existence.

To say this in another way, also derived from kabbalistic language, I am depicting the entire course of evolution as the infinitely varied self-garbing of an endless energy flow. All being exists in an eternal dialectic of *hitpashtut*, the emanatory flowing forth of that single energy, and *hitlabeshut*, the garbing of that energy in distinctive forms. But now we add an important post-Darwinian caveat to that mystical view of existence.

The only means this One has in this process of self-manifestation are those of natural selection and its resulting patterns of change and growth. It *is* nature (yes, "nature," if its awesome and mysterious self is acknowledged, could be another name for that which I have called "God," "the One," and "Being"). Hence the length and slowness of the journey. But precisely in this lies the utterly marvelous nature of what has come forth, step after single step. To see that process with the eye of wonder is the starting point of religious awareness.

As more highly developed forms of animal life emerge, the move forward of natural selection takes place partly in the form of aggression and competition, each creature and species grasping at its chance to survive and prosper. The competition for food and other resources, the devices created by males and females of various species to attract mates and reproduce, the struggle to find and eat one's prey rather than be consumed by one's predators, are all essential parts of the story, indeed *our* story. This is an aspect of our biological legacy that we need to own and confront. We will not understand our own human nature without taking into account the fierce struggle we underwent to arrive and to achieve the dominance we have over this planet, for better and worse. But that same mysterious inner process also brings about more cooperative forms of societal organization, in which such creatures as ants, bees, and humans learn to work together toward fulfilling their species' goals. All of this is part of our biological legacy. Indeed it is in grasping how these two trends, the competitive and the collaborative, combine and interact that we come to understand how our species survives, and perhaps even catch a glimpse of what humanity essentially is. More importantly, because we can achieve this understanding, we can make the value decisions as to which

aspects of that biological heritage we want to take the lead as we proceed with our lives, both as individuals and as a species.

But it would also be disingenuous of me as a human to say that the emergence of human consciousness, even the ability to be thinking and writing about these very matters, is nothing more than a small series in the unfolding linear process wrought by natural selection. Yes, that is indeed *how* we came about. But there is a different *meaning* to human existence that cannot be denied. The self-reflective consciousness of humans, combined with our ability to take a long bio-historical view of the whole unfolding that lies behind (and ahead of) us, makes a difference. Yes, all creatures are doing the “work of God” by existing, feeding, reproducing, and moving the evolutionary process forward. But we humans, especially in our age, are called upon to do that work in a different way. We have emerged as partners of the One in the survival and maintenance of this planet and all the precious attainments that have evolved here. Without our help, it will not continue to thrive. Being has thus turned a corner, or come back in a self-reflexive circle, as it manifests itself in the human mind.

The Call to Adam

IN THE LONG MARCH TOWARD INCREASED COMPLEXITY AND ability of species, the emergence of the human brain is an important and transformative “moment.” We humans represent a significant step forward in the evolutionary path toward the self-articulation and self-fulfillment of that One. If the purpose of the journey is one of manifestation or becoming known, the development of our powers of reflective consciousness are surely key. But let me say immediately that I do not view us humans—surely not as we are now—to be the end or purpose of evolution. We, like all other species, are a step along the way. If existence survives on this planet, Mind will one day be manifest to a degree far beyond our present ability to comprehend or predict. On *that* day, Scripture says, “earth will be filled with knowledge of Y-H-W-H as water fills the sea” (Isa. 11:9)—just that wholly and naturally.

Because we humans represent a new and important step in this journey, the One manifest within us calls out to us in a particular human way. It addresses each of us 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 “humans” in Hebrew, and note that here the language itself leads me to migrate farther into the realm of myth) are addressed with the word the God of Genesis used to call out to the first human: *Ayehkah?* “Where are you?” The indwelling One asks this of every person, of every human embodiment of its own single Self. 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 knowing and fulfilling the One that is all of life’s goal? That is why you are here, tumbling and stumbling forward from one generation to the next! *What are you doing about it?*

“Where are you?” calls out to us in three distinctly human dimensions. The first of these is mental or intellectual: “Are you stretching your mind to move forward, to carry on the evolutionary process in the realm of understanding, 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 civilizations over the millennia. The imperative to stretch the mind includes scientific thought, the ongoing attempt to understand and unpack the mysteries of our universe. But it also embraces the humanities and the arts, the expanding of human consciousness in more subtle ways. Some of the highest manifestation of this ongoing evolutionary process are to be found in our ideas and images of God, as we move from primitive tribal gods and local nature deities through classical polytheism (the “pantheon” of gods), on to primitive monolatry (there is but one god worthy of worship), into true universal monotheism, and then toward greater abstraction and depth of thought. All of these are stages on the road toward that total comprehension of Being in its oneness that lies somewhere in our future. In our own day this quest 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. “Where are you?” Are you stretching your mind to its fullest to know the One?

The second way in which this “Where are you?” calls out to us involves a stretching of 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



DETAIL FROM “BLUE MOUNTAINS OF LONGEVITY” BY IMAGO DEI (WWW.IMAGODEIART.COM)

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 individual 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 frailty of our lives and the great religious question that hovers over us. Only as we face this challenge 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 spiritual work that each of us has to do consists primarily of letting go, allowing that presence to enter our consciousness and transform us. In the course of this process we enable ourselves to become *givers* or fountains of blessing in the grand economy of existence, rather than *consumers* who simply take all for ourselves without giving back to life. “Where are you?” Are you stretching your heart to open as widely as it can?

The third area in which “Where are you?” calls upon us 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 garb of divine presence. The way in which we treat them and relate to them is the ultimate 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. That every human being is the image of God is Judaism’s most basic moral truth. We need to help all humans to discover this dimension of their own existence in whatever terms they may choose to articulate it. We recognize that this truth may be depicted differently in the varied religious and secular 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 that stem directly from the reality that we call *tselem elohim*, the image of God. A person cannot be expected to discover the image of God within him or herself 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 and fills 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—social, political, or economic barriers—and they too have to become the object of our attention as people and communities of faith. “Where are you?” Are you engaged in the work given to you by the call of God?

All of these aspects of the call are the stuff of Jewish moral theology. In a sense I am commenting here on the opening teaching



of the Talmud, the great treasury of rabbinic law and wisdom. Although the Talmud seems to begin with discussion of prayer and its proper hour, buried within it lies a little treatise called *Avot*, “Principles,” an eternal favorite of Jewish moral teachers. This tractate was meant to serve as an introduction to the Talmud (or perhaps a concluding summation?). Hence it begins with a superscription, telling us whence authority for the Law is derived: “Moses received Torah from Sinai and gave it to Joshua, who gave it to the judges, who gave it to the prophets, who gave it to the elders” and so forth. But then the first teaching is stated: “*The world stands upon three things: on Torah* (teaching, wisdom, the cultivation of awareness), *on Worship* (the struggle to open the heart), *and on Deeds of Kindness* (the active transformation of the world; the bringing about of “God’s kingdom”).”

In asserting that humans are “called” in a distinctive way by the One that dwells within us, I also realize that I am making a claim for our species that sounds like we are the apex or final goal of this ongoing self-disclosing process that takes place within all creatures. Far from it! I do believe that there is an inbuilt drive toward greater complexity and higher forms of consciousness, in which the emergence of the human brain is a most significant step. But again I want to acknowledge that the ultimate stages of this process lie far, far beyond us, as far beyond our awareness and sensitivities as our mind is from those we consider much simpler and more “primitive” forms of life. Living as we do at the dawn of a new age, one in which the human mind will be augmented and

challenged by our *golem* of “artificial intelligence,” we can hardly imagine the new heights and depths that understandings of reality will attain, even in a relatively short expanse of time. As we unravel the genome and the mysteries of DNA, the truth that each of us bears within us the memory of all earlier generations, indeed of the whole evolutionary process, becomes ever clearer. What will it take to convert that understanding into *real* memory, and how greatly will that add to our appreciation of who we are and the long journey on which we have come? As to where the journey is leading, I envision a mind so vastly expanded beyond ours that it will be able to embrace the whole of bio- and geo-history, everything back to the beginning, all as One. On that day, indeed, shall “Y-H-W-H be one and its name one!” But we are still a long way from there. Meanwhile, keeping our planet alive is the first order of business.

My Own Roots and Beginnings

THE IDEAS I HAVE SHARED HERE COME FROM MY YEARS OF thought as a Jewish seeker. I have been reading, studying, writing, and teaching theology to Jews—including many present and future rabbis—for nearly half a century. Yet I still think of myself primarily as a seeker. That means living in pursuit of an ever-present yet ever-elusive God, the One of Whom Scripture says: “Seek His face, always” (Ps. 105:4). There is no end to such seeking. But it also means questing after truth, or at least *my* truth, one that wells up from my own life-experience and feels authentic to who I am, as a person and as a Jew. Personal and intellectual honesty are essential to my life as a seeker; I do not permit them to be overwhelmed by traditional claims or by emotional need. In this I am a longtime disciple of Rabbi Bunem of Przysucha who taught: “Do not deceive anybody” (Lev. 25:17)—not even yourself!”

These two realities, being a God-seeker and a truth-seeker, might seem to go hand in hand. Supposedly God *is* Truth, after all. But in my case they present a terrible yet wonderful conflict. It is

this conflict, and my ongoing attempt to resolve it, that my current work—including my forthcoming book, *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God And Tradition*, from which this article was adapted—is all about.

I have understood since childhood that I am a deeply religious person, one easily moved by the power of sacred language, rites, and symbols. Through them I am sometimes able to enter into states of inner openness to some nameless and transcendent presence, that which I choose to call “God.” Raised in a Jewish atheist household, I was powerfully attracted to the synagogue by the time I was seven or eight years old. The grandeur and mystery of its liturgy, the drama of its sacred calendar, and the infinite beauty and intricacies of the Hebrew language all drew me in and have never ceased to fascinate me.

At the same time, I have long known that I am not a “believer” in the conventional Jewish or Western sense. I simply do not encounter God as “He” is usually described in the Western religious context, a Supreme Being or Creator who exists outside or beyond the universe, who created this world as an act of personal will, and who guides and protects it. Indeed I do not know that such an “outside” or a “beyond” exists. Challenges to conventional theological views, as well as to all the apologetic reformulations that seek to save them, came at me rather hard at the end of adolescence. I had chosen the religious life on my own, becoming quite fully (and somewhat compulsively) observant as an adolescent. But the regimen of Orthodox practice I had adopted, at the cost of terrible family battles, came crashing down during my college years, when I accepted that its theological underpinnings had been rooted in fantasy and denial of reality.

The challenges came from two directions: theodicy and critical history. The former included both personal loss (my mother died when I was eleven, and I had spent much of adolescence mourning her and struggling with that loss) and the fact of being a Jew in the immediate post-Holocaust generation. I remember the day my beloved East European grandfather found out just what had happened to the Jews of his town, as I recall my mother and grandmother going through newspaper lists of “relatives sought” in the early post-war years. These experiences, both personal and collective, made it clear to me that I could affirm neither particular providence nor a God who governed history. The God of childhood dreams, the One who could show that life was indeed fair after all, was gone. My initiation into adulthood meant full acceptance of the arbitrariness of fate, including the finality of death.

At about the same time, I was exposed to Jewish scholarship, including the critical reading of the Hebrew Bible and its history. This exciting intellectual enterprise, which gripped my imagination, also undermined the residue of faith I had in Scripture as revealed. The text was edited, composed of (*continued on page 72*)



FLICKR/CLAWRIE DATE

NOTES ON SILENCE

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merit of amusing and multi-tasking ourselves to death. Against the odds of what at times appears to be a conspiracy of noise, we must try to assert our birthright to retreat, reflect, and regenerate.

Solitude tends to produce an understanding of our own limitations, and it forces us to seek our own council in dealing with them. And, in turn, the insights and greater self-awareness attained in solitude eventually need to be tested in the company of others.

Emerson sums this up succinctly: "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude."

Yet silence, like any controlled substance, must be handled with care. Initiates, or masters of silence—such as solitaries, thinkers, monks, hermits, and ascetics—have long known how to mine it for fortitude and insight, or to arrive at *ecstasis* ("to be or stand outside oneself"). But it is up to each individual to determine how much is desirable or useful; too much of this good thing may be counterproductive for some, even dangerous—leading to despair, madness, or even suicide.

Just as the silences of monasteries and institutional spaces are not for everyone, so too extended travels to the foreign land of silence are not for tourists. Snake-handlers of the spirit—those versed in playing with dangerous things—may engage deeply with the death-in-living that is desert dwelling, the soul-trials of solitude, or even their own shifting images in the mirror. Others, less practiced, might not endure such extreme experiences (tastes of the Limit), and might emerge damaged. Striking out fearlessly into treacherous, interior territories is not for dilettantes: deep and prolonged silence might prove the undoing of those who flirt with it, ill equipped.

"Social intercourse seduces one into self-contemplation," muses writer Franz Kafka. The aim, then, is to try to find that healthy balance—between silent fasts and noise feasts—on the slippery road to moderation. ■

SACRED EVOLUTION

(continued from page 40)

many sources. Each of these represented a particular human community or interest group. What, then, was left of revelation? Where was the authority of Scripture, if the text was *merely* human? I struggled with what it could mean to claim that God had "given us His Torah" when the Torah text itself seemed to "evaporate" into so many documents. Without that, I had no basis for believing in a God who had commanded specific forms of religious behavior. (This seemed to be the essential "payoff" question in Judaism.) So the pillars of naive faith had given way and its edifice lay in ruins. I had no answers to the great questions around which my religious life had been constructed.

I was no longer a believer, in the usual sense of that term, but I learned rather quickly that I was still a religious person, struggling with issues of faith. I still sought after God, perhaps even more so once I had given up on my naive understandings of reality. That was the true beginning of my quest, one in which the only questions that mattered were the unanswerable ones. I absorbed much of Nietzsche, Kafka, and Camus in those years of questioning. From Nietzsche came the moment of joy at the death of my childhood God and the liberation from all that authority. But this gave way rather quickly to the bleak and empty universe Kafka so poignantly described, a joyless world from which God was absent and there was no air left to breathe, no room left to live, to love, or to create. From Camus and Nikos Kazantzakis came the noble call to make meaning on my own, to defy meaninglessness with creativity and moral action. But the more I sought to *create* a framework of meaning, picking up the shattered tablets of my one-time Jewish life, the more I came to realize that I was in fact only *rediscovering* patterns that were there to be seen, and had indeed been seen and articulated by countless generations before me.

It was in the course of this re-creation that I had to come back to the question of God. Who or what was the God I still

sought—and still seek today, half a century later!—once I had accepted that I was such a "nonbeliever" in the God of my childhood? The question seemed to be whether we post-naive seekers dare to use the word "God" any more and what we might—or might not—mean by it, while remaining personally and intellectually honest.

To explain this, I have to go back to the phrase "I was still a religious person." What can it mean to "be religious," in a Jewish (and not Buddhist) context if one does not "believe in God," at least as defined by the above parameters? It means that I still consider the sacred to be the most important and meaningful dimension of human life. "The sacred" refers to an inward, mysterious sense of awesome presence, a deeper reality than we ordinarily experience. Life bears within it the possibility of inner transcendence; the moments when we glimpse it are so rare and powerful that they call upon us to transform the rest of our lives in their wake. These moments can come upon us without warning, though they may be evoked by great beauty, by joy, by terror, or by anything that causes us to stop and interrupt our ordinary all-encompassing and yet essentially superficial perception of reality. When that *mask of ordinariness* falls away, our consciousness is left with a moment of nakedness, a confrontation with a reality that we do not know how to put into language. The astonishment of such moments, that which my most revered teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, termed "radical amazement," is the starting-point of my religious life. I believe, in other words, in the possibility and irreducible reality of religious experience. Such experience stands behind theology; it is the most basic datum with which the would-be theologian has to work. The awareness that derives from that range of human experiences, distilled by reflection, is the basis of religious thought, and therefore of my own work, as well.

What is the nature of this experience? It is as varied as the number of individual humans there are in the world, and potentially as multifarious as there are moments in each of those human lives. In the midst of life, our ordinariness is interrupted. This may take place as we touch one of the edges of life, in a great confrontation with the

new life of a child, or of an approaching death. We may see it in wonders of nature, sunrises and sunsets, mountains and oceans. It may happen to us in the course of loving and deeply entering into union with another, or in profound aloneness. Sometimes, however, such a moment of holy and awesome presence comes upon us without any apparent provocation at all. It may come as a deep inner stillness, quieting all the background noise that usually fills our inner chambers, or it may be quite the opposite, a loud rush and excitement that fills us to overflowing. It may seem to come from within or without, or perhaps both at once. The realization of such moments fills us with a sense of magnificence, of smallness, and of belonging, all at once. Our hearts well up with love for the world around us and awe before its grandeur. The experience is usually one that renders us speechless. But then we feel lucky and blessed if we have enough tie to a tradition that gives us language, that enables us to say “the whole earth is filled with God’s glory!”

God is not an intellectual proposition for me, but rather the ground of life itself. It is the name I give to the reality I encounter in such a moment, one that feels more authentic and deeply perceptive of truth than any other. I believe with complete faith that every human being is capable of such experience, and that these moments place us in contact with the elusive inner essence of being that I call “God.” It is out of such moments that religion is born, our human response to the dizzying depths of an encounter we cannot—and yet so need to—name. I returned to tradition, the one of my ancestors and my early attempts at faith, because it gave me a language with which to name that inner “place.” I find myself less convinced by the dogmatic truth-claims of tradition than I am powerfully attracted to the richness of its language, both in word and symbolic gesture. Through the profound echo-chamber of countless generations, it offers a way to respond, to channel the love and awe that rise up within us at such times, and to give a name to the holy mystery by which our lives are bounded.

I was about twenty years old when I

began studying the Zohar (the thirteenth-century classic of medieval Kabbalah) and the teachings of the Hasidic masters (Eastern Europe, eighteenth century). This encounter with the mystical tradition saved Judaism for me. Without it I would have wandered away. The essential insights of Hasidism—that God is to be sought and found everywhere and in each moment, that the quest for a deeper truth about reality is a lifelong adventure, and that our ongoing discovery of God can uplift and transform both soul and world—soon became *my* truths. The best semi-systematic work where I found them presented in those early years was a little treatise called *Fundamentals of Hasidism* by Hillel Zeitlin, one of the two key (along with Martin Buber) neo-Hasidic thinkers of interwar Europe, and famous martyr of the Warsaw ghetto. When I read those pages—his discussions of “Being and Nothingness,” “The Self-Contraction of God,” and “Uplifting Sparks,”—I remember somehow knowing that I had found my own religious language, one that spoke deeply to my soul, while challenging rather than offending my mind. It has served me well across the decades, and I hope that I have come to serve it faithfully as well.

I am a neo-Hasidic Jew, one deeply influenced by the lives and teachings of the early Hasidic masters, but choosing not to live within the strict parameters of religious praxis that characterize Hasidism, and not sharing the later Hasidic disdain for secular education or for the modern world as a whole. It has long been clear to me that the insights into reality to be found in the texts, lives, and stories of that tradition need to be shared more broadly, something I have tried to do over a lifetime of writing and teaching. I also have a sense that the spiritual legacy of Hasidism should not belong to Jews alone. Its insights into the great universal questions, though expressed in deeply Jewish language, have importance for Jews and non-Jews (particularly, but not only, Christians) alike, for all who take religious questions seriously and who understand the critical hour in which we live.

I also think of myself as a *religious*

humanist. Humanism means an understanding that our fate, along with that of the entire planet, depends on human action. There is no one to hold back our hand, to keep us from destroying this garden in which we have been placed. We are totally responsible. *Religious* humanism means that we will fulfill that awesome role only by realizing that we are part of a reality infinitely more ancient, more profound, and more unified than any of us can express or know.

My forthcoming book is an unpacking of the ways in which I see mysticism and humanism, two seemingly very distinct approaches to life, complementing one another. Its title, *Radical Judaism*, shows my roots in the “Radical Theology” movement of the late 1960s. I have recalled elsewhere a conversation I had with Heschel in which I asked him what he thought about Radical Theology, a movement that spoke of the “Death of God,” which Heschel had termed “blasphemy.” But this very “Death of God” was also clearing the road for precisely the sort of “depth theology” that Heschel himself had advocated. “Radical Theology is very important,” he answered, “but it has to begin with the teachings of the Hasidic masters.” Forty years later, I have written a book that I hope is that theology.

The “radicalism” of my work may not be what some readers would expect. I am primarily a thinker and teacher, not an activist. Although I share a strong progressivist view on political and social issues, my work is about a different sort of radicalism, one that takes us back to our deepest roots and challenges us to rethink our lives from that perspective. It has implications in the social sphere, to be sure, but its core lies in the realm of a contemporary mystic’s understanding of who we are, how we got here, and where we are going. Call that “theology,” if you like. In Jewish terms, it is a call to return to our Source, the one that underlies and precedes all our so-venerated “sources.”

I may be speaking in Jewish terms, but my work is aimed at an audience that transcends all the conventional religious lines. In former times, theology was written only for those who lived within a particular religious community and shared

the symbols and liturgical language of that faith-community. Its function was largely to explicate those symbols and to give an intelligible account of how they bore that community's message. But given the wider concerns and the urgency of the hour, I set myself a different goal. I hope to reach both Jews and non-Jews. I write as a radically heterodox Jew, but I hope to reach some of my Orthodox brothers and sisters as well. My work will hopefully embrace readers who have been exposed to the religious languages of East as well as West, including some of the many who are making a "journey homeward" after encountering meditation and spirituality first in an Eastern setting. I think they will find my language to represent a Judaism closer to those teachings than they might have expected. ■

FAMILY COURTS

(continued from page 27)

their positions and soak up the adversarial atmosphere. What would the percentage be at the point a party first enters a lawyer's office or talks to a friend or counselor about divorce?

As a result of this research, Dr. Doherty has designed a university project to offer reconciliation services in divorce cases, the Minnesota Reconciliation Project (www.mnreconciliation.org). The essential component, of course, is to offer effective services. Since marriage counseling has often been tried without success, the project also features more intense interventions like weekend retreats and mentoring by couples who have restored their marriages to health after teetering on the brink of divorce. Mailings to parties who have recently filed for divorce have just gone out, and work with the first interested couples has begun. We will know more in the coming months about who seeks help and what works.

The Minnesota Reconciliation Project has also begun to develop specialized services for the "leavee" spouse, whose pain and anger can be expressed, sometimes for years, in conflict and efforts to sabotage a peaceful divorce process. The reconciliation project serves people with

active divorce cases, and I have high hopes that a private sector, non-adversarial divorce process would be much more sophisticated about recognizing the opportunity in family strife for healing and reconciliation long before the courts get involved. Dr. Doherty has already begun working with a creative group of collaborative lawyers to develop protocols and language for lawyers to use to open up the sensitive topic of reconciliation as an option for clients who come seeking a divorce. Eventually the entire divorce system might start asking who is healing rather than who is winning.

Help Unmarried Parents Build Families

I AM CONTENDING THAT THE COURT system's adversary processes are counter-productive for resolving divorces. But the surge in unmarried parenting has thrust the courts into a relatively new field where formal legal arrangements do have an important role. Unmarried parents lack the legal ties and history of a marriage, and sometimes have only a tenuous relationship on which to build a cooperative parenting partnership. The court system is about the only venue presently available to build a family out of these components.

There is another factor that makes the role of the courts in unmarried parent cases so important—most of the parties are poor. Part of that is due to the demographics of single parenting—poor people are the most likely to have children outside of marriage. But the bigger reason for the profile of the unmarried cases the courts see is the extensive, federally funded child support enforcement system. All over the country, every day, government lawyers are tracking down the partners—usually fathers—of parents receiving public assistance and hauling them into court to confirm their parentage and establish child support obligations to recoup the government's public assistance outlays. The irony is that many of these fathers are poor themselves and have little money to contribute to child support.

The sophisticated research on unmarried parents coming from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study at Princeton (fragilefamilies.princeton.edu)

confirms that a large percentage of unmarried parents are closely connected with each other and their child around the time of the birth. But without the legal structure, social support, and cultural expectations of a marriage, these relationships often drift apart. She gets a new boyfriend, he gets a new girlfriend, and life moves on. By the time the children of unmarried parents reach age five, over 60 percent of their parents are living apart, and nearly 40 percent of the nonresident parents have not seen the child in the last two years. This is a big loss—the research is increasingly clear that high-quality involvement by the noncustodial parent can go a long way to improving the prospects of these children. And yet when the parents of these at-risk children stand together in a courtroom in the official procedure addressing their parenting connection, the discussion will likely be just about money, the noncustodial parent will feel his or her primary value is as a cash machine, and a prime opportunity to support these people as parents will be lost.

If our society is going to weather an unmarried parent rate of 40 percent, concentrated in the lowest socioeconomic groups, we need to develop institutions and cultural expectations to support unmarried co-parenting. In our court we are about to begin a grant-funded pilot project we call "Co-Parent Court," a problem-solving court for unmarried parents. In partnership with community and government agencies, including both our state and local child support agencies, Co-Parent Court will soon add co-parent education, domestic abuse screening and programming, family group conferencing, and parenting support services (like employment and housing assistance) to the current focus on collecting child support. The goal is for parents to graduate from the program committed to a lasting parenting plan tailored to their circumstances. We believe we can show that investing in the parents will bring a far larger return in child well-being.

Projects like Co-Parent Court could start to provide the legal framework unmarried parents need. A deeper understanding of the significance of being an