"No," I said quietly.

She wept without restraint, and I wept with her. Finally she touched my shoulder with a single finger and whispered,

"Tell me, where is that way you know about?"

Above the ceiling, in the attic, we heard the dull tapping. The crutches of Kalonymus the Student banged rhythmically: one-one, one-two.

THE ROLE OF JEWISH MYSTICISM IN A CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY OF JUDAISM

Arthur E. Green

It is difficult to begin this discussion without taking brief note of the historic ironies which are inherent in this situation. The mystical tradition in Judaism, that first piece of our collective historic baggage which had to be dropped as we sought entry into the modern West, is now turned to as a source of guidance in the theological crisis of a latter-day liberal Jewry. We cannot but wonder how our spiritual ancestors within the realm of Jewish modernity would look upon this enterprise. Geiger and Frankel, to say nothing of Graetz, would undoubtedly be horrified. Schechter, whose own hasidic background served to temper the rationalism of his *Wissenschaft* tradition, might listen more openly. But the Vilna/Berlin axis upon which the intellectual life of our own movement has largely been built (despite Heschel's valiant attempts to the contrary) could do little but revere and ignore Schecter's beautifully sympathetic treatments of the Safed kabbalists and the hasidim of Eastern Europe. No one could have guessed, even as recently as thirty or forty years ago, that kabbalah would regain the respectability in modern Jewish circles, including our own, which it seems to be achieving in our day.

It is therefore appropriate that we seek some measure of historical explanation for this rather startling change of attitude. There are four areas of explanation which I believe to be worthy of at least brief mention. Not the least of these is the work of Gershom Scholem and his students in the Jerusalem school of kabbalistic research. It is largely thanks to Scholem that the classic works of kabbalism are becoming accessible to us; it is through his penetrating analyses of these works that contemporary Jewish thinkers are coming to realize that the kabbalists were no small-minded obscurantists lost in the mazes of occult lore but were rather dealing with *devarim ha'omedim berumo shel*

olam, highly significant concerns. Whether we agree with each of Scholem's particular conclusions or not, our debt to him is great.

It is also clear that the Holocaust and its aftermath have much to do with the resurgence of interest in kabbalah. The blinding power of these events made a mockery of the liberal rationalism which dominated one strand of pre-war Jewish thinking and dealt a stunning blow to non-mystical theological orthodoxy in forcing it to confront more seriously than ever its classical nemesis, the problem of theodicy. It is no accident that one of the leading spokesmen of Jewish religiosity today is Elie Wiesel, who is nurtured by the wellsprings of kabbalistic and hasidic Judaism, coming from that corner of Europe where mystical piety survived most fully down to the Hitlerite destruction. As we confront the magnitude of the Holocaust, the kabbalist's deep awareness of *sitra ahra,* the power of evil, and its power in the world has taken on a new reality for us; Wiesel's heroes, ever standing on the edge of mystical madness, express something that has been burned deeply into all our souls. Still more profoundly, perhaps, the experience of the Holocaust has called forth a new longing for the depths of mythical expression in our religious lives, a depth which is never reached by the bland and prosaic pronouncements of religious liberalism. Jacob Neusner has shown that the collective experience of the Jewish people in our times has been one of death and resurrection, an experience which parallels the classic mythic paradigm best known to Western religion. In the face of this experience, only the most profound uses of mythic and symbolic imagination will be able to touch us. Here, too, it is the kabbalist who immediately comes to mind.

A third area which should be mentioned is that of the general popularity of mysticism in Western culture today, especially among the younger generation in the United States. One is tempted to paraphrase the old adage to read *"vi es hindu't zikh* – or *zen't zikh – azoi es yidelt zikh."* We are living through one of those ages in the history of Western man when the traditional sources of our culture are not succeeding in satisfying the spiritual cravings of our most sensitive individuals and when the mysterious wisdom of the East is called forth as a redeeming alternative. Be this a failure of Western philosophy/theology or an inevitable result of living in the nuclear and post-Holocaust age, we cannot help but be reminded of the Hellenistic era, when the mystery cults of the East gained ascendancy over the more superficial rationalism of sophisticated Roman piety and when a new religious synthesis emerged that was to transform human spiritual history for all time to come. Though our present tendency is but miniscule in comparison to that

great movement, an awareness of the historic parallel should be helpful to us in understanding the directions emerging in the religiosity of our own times. Clearly it will be the mystical aspects of our tradition to which such young people will turn, if they turn to Judaism at all.

The final area of historical explanation which I wish to mention will be discussed further in the main body of this paper. We Jews are relatively new arrivals in the modern West, recent immigrants, if you will, from the later middle ages. In understanding Jewish intellectual history, it is terribly important to remember that the bulk of Jewish religious creativity took place in those lands where neither the Renaissance nor the Reformation had a primary impact and where the Enlightenment struck with full force only in the latter half of the nineteenth century. As we entered the modern world we discovered that the two great rationales which our medieval sages had offered to buttress our faith were both at the point of collapse. Halevi offered us history as the basis of faith, staying close to the sacred history of the Bible, while the Maimonideans offered us rational argumentation. As we confront modernity, however, we find that neither of these is of much help. History, if examined critically, will not support our faith-claims: the findings of biblical studies and especially of comparative religion have been devastating here. Few of us would any longer make the literal claim that Sinai is a true event because of the testimony of six hundred thousand witnesses. Similarly, the rational proofs offered by philosophers for the existence of a First Cause or for the likelihood of creation in time leave us cold. Based on a hopelessly outdated Aristotelian physic and metaphysic, such arguments fail to convince anyone in our time. The neo-Thomism which was popular in Catholic circles a generation ago does not provide an example which many of us would want to follow. This is not to dismiss the value of our medieval philosophical tradition altogether but to realize that it is more to the poetic piety of Halevi or to the spiritual elevation of Maimonides that we are drawn than to either of their arguments in support of specific truth-claims. Attempts by German-Jewish thinkers to reestablish Judaism on a philosophical basis, choosing Kant or Hegel instead of Aristotle or Plotinus, have largely not succeeded in capturing our imagination. It is partially in response to the collapse of these traditional supports of faith that mysticism is sought out by contemporary Jews. Basing itself first and foremost upon the testimony of the inner life and spiritual experience, it is the least vulnerable of all approaches to religion to the claims of the philosophical or historic critic – but God help the mystic when reductionist psychology gets hold of him!

POST-HOLOCAUST JEWRY

We turn now to the central task of this paper: the seeking out of contemporary theological meaning in the sources of Jewish mystical experience. The contemporary theological situation of the Jew is first and foremost that of the Jew after the Holocaust. The thirty years since that event have not marked the abating of pain but rather have witnessed its deepening. Only within the last decade have the wounds of the Holocaust made themselves felt in our theological literature. We read with amazement many things that were written on Judaism in the forties and fifties which seem to take so little note of the overwhelming trauma through which the people of Israel had just passed: real reaction to the Holocaust in those decades was the province of Yiddish poets and Yizkor-book assemblers, but not yet of theologians. No wonder: Scholem has taught us an important lesson in noting that the Lurianic reaction to the expulsion from Spain was some seventy-five years in the making. Only since the mid-sixties have Rubenstein, Fackenheim, Berkovits and others forced us to confront the fact that the Jewish theologian today who does not somehow speak to the Holocaust is simply not speaking to the Jew's deepest encounter with reality.

In the face of the Holocaust, Richard Rubenstein elaborates a theology of Judaism which is most deeply influenced by Freud and Camus. With all of our illusions shattered, the God of history, the dream of ultimate historical redemption, and any traditional notion of revelation among them, Rubenstein sees the essential task as one of confrontation with the absurd. The only position which is both honest and healthy is one in which we come to terms with "the Nothingness out of which we have come and to which we are inescapably bound to return." In this confrontation, he writes, "we may have begun a voyage of discovery wherein we may hopefully find the true God." That God is the great nothing, a silent ground of being to which we return only in the grave. As for our Judaism, "it is the way we Jews share our lives in an unfeeling and silent cosmos. It is the flickering candle we have lighted in the darkness to enlighten and to warm us."

I begin my own theological reflections by asking how we move *beyond* this position which has been so well articulated by Rubenstein. Our confrontation with absurdity must be a real one. On the level of historic *peshat*, if you will, there is no denying the Godless universe which he has challenged us to confront. There was no redeeming hand, no answer to prayer, no pattern of meaning to be found that would in any way confirm our classic aims of faith. But what does one do in the

face of this absurdity? My argument with Rubenstein is not in description of reality, but in attitude and reaction. His Judaism can offer us only the flickering candle; there is a deep and overwhelming pessimism in that choice of phrase. Darkness cannot be dispelled; absurdity cannot be conquered. All we can do is huddle together for a bit of human warmth.

A very different model for what it means to live after the Holocaust (and here it is Fackenheim who has caught it) has been provided by the survivors themselves, that amazing generation of Jews who came out of the camps and forests, settled both in *erets yisrael* and elsewhere, and began building new lives for themselves. I find myself utterly overwhelmed by the instinctive courage of those Jews who began to create new families in 1946 and 1947, who conceived children in the D.P. camps, who realized *al korhekha atah hai,* that they were forced to reaffirm life. In the face of the Holocaust our task is one of reaffirmation, not despair. We must confront that world of utter emptiness – not to do so would be a lie – but then we must go on to radically reject it.

That generation of Jewish survivors was by and large a strikingly atheological group. They did not stop to reflect on the meaning of survival; such a luxury was far beyond what they could psychologically afford. If they did articulate any value, it was one of personal and national survival as an end in itself, not raised to the level of asking questions as to what such survival said in terms of the ongoing saga of Israel wrestling with its God. Fackenheim himself has lent serious articulation to the voice of that generation in promulgating a Judaism which sees survival per se as having ultimate meaning.

But what does it mean for a Jew to survive *religiously?* As heroic as we may find Wiesel's arguments and battles with God, Rubenstein's call for confrontation with the naked truth, and Fackenheim's exultation in the survival of Jewry, the spiritual heights which our tradition always strove to attain will not be reached by any of these approaches to life. A religious human being must be able to recognize his vulnerablity, must be able to allow himself moments of surrender, must be able to affirm and to love God, despite all. Without this openness to the presence that fills us and overwhelms us there can be no spiritual life. As defiled as the Shekhinah may be in our time, we must still be able to love her. *Unless the new Jew can overcome the veneer of toughness toward God that he has taken on as a healthy defensive pose, he will have lost the only inner core that will give meaning to his hard-fought struggle for survival.*

DIVINE SELF-WITHDRAWAL

How do we move to a position of spiritual affirmation in the face of the absurd world which Rubenstein has portrayed for us? The one figure in the history of Judaism who seems to have best understood this dilemma (and it is no accident that his name will come up several times in the course of these remarks) is Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav. Rabbi Nahman used the kabbalistic image of *tzimtzum* in a radically new way, in which that symbol came to realize its fullest depth. *Tzimtzum* means God's voluntary self-withdrawal from the world. This withdrawal must be real, said Rabbi Nahman, for without it there could be no world – everything would be one with God. But if there is *tzimtzum* and you take that notion seriously, he went on, there is an ongoing level of reality from which God has absented Himself, a level of truth on which God does not exist. The void of the kabbalistic creation-myth could not, for Rabbi Nahman, remain a primal stage which existed only in man's archaic memories but was rather an aspect of real experience that every person of faith would sometime have to confront. The philosopher who denied God was, according to Rabbi Nahman, in touch with a certain aspect of the truth; the religious man would have to confront that truth, recognize it on its own terms, but ultimately see that it too was one of the masks of God, and thus transcend it. He proposed something like a three-tiered model of consciousness. On the plane of unthinking piety, said Nahman, we live in a world filled with God's presence. This was Nahman's inheritance from the ecstatic piety of his hasidic surroundings. But probe deeper, he knew, and begin to ask questions, and you will discover that there is no God at all. On that level you *can't* find God, he admitted, because that is the level of *tzimtzum,* from which God has to be absent if there is to be a world (read "if there is to be a world with separate human identity and moral responsibility"). Go deeper yet, however, and God will reappear. There is another rung of consciousness on the far side of all doubts and all emptiness, a level of the self which can never be reached by rational inquiry or even by language itself, but only by silence and faith. Only by confronting the void and transcending it do we find God. This is why, Rabbi Nahman reminds us, we are called *ivrim,* "transcenders" – because our job is nothing less than the building of bridges over *tehom rabah* itself. Our religious language and our faith are the stuff of which such bridges are made. Here is no pitiful "candle in the darkness" but rather a trembling yet defiant denial of darkness' ultimate power over our lives, a denial which lies at the core of all religious faith. This has to

be the force of our *shema yisrael* and *veahavta* as we proclaim it in post-Holocaust times: in the face of all that has befallen us, we still proclaim a oneness of God that goes beyond all despair and assert that we will not allow Hitler and the forces of darkness to rob us of our ability to love God and His world.

The challenge, however, is not resolved at this point. Is this reassertion of Jewish faith going to have to mean that we return to truth-claims which, even without the Holocaust, would have been impossible for us to maintain? The challenges of critical history and philosophy to which we have referred earlier now come to mock us. Rabbi Nahman may discover the absolute of God on the other side of the void, but it is hardly likely that one will be able to defend the specific myths, legends, and legal authority structure that make for Judaism by reference to that level of human truth. As much as we may love our traditional symbols and seek to reembrace them, we realize that we cannot defend their unique truth on any historical or metaphysical plane. This, by the way, seems to me the really crucial distinction between us heterodox Jews and the Orthodox, and this is the real implication of The Jewish Theological Seminary's acceptance of the critical/historical method. Once this method has been introduced, the historically determined and therefore relative character of all our traditions and theological formulations will follow. Unlike the fully Orthodox Jew, we will ever stand in a certain insider/outsider relationship to the claims of our tradition.

Luhot veshivrei luhot munahim hayu ba'aron. "The tablets and their fragments were placed in the Ark." I like to think that the broken tablets were put there for us, for that generation which can find truth only by assembling bits and pieces. This defines what it means to be a critical intellectual in the twentieth-century West: to know that truth is to be found only in fragmented form.

THE INNER LIFE AS TESTIMONY

The fact is that we are left utterly without proof in any of the most basic claims that we as religious Jews would like to make about the world: that there is a God who creates out of love, that He reveals Himself to us, and that we are not utterly foolhardy in seeking to discover and do His will. No proof, that is, except that which the mystic has claimed all along as the only ultimate support of faith: the testimony of the inner life. We know God through the testimony of our hearts, and we know that ours is a valid path to Him through the testimony of pious Jews through the ages and the lives they have led.

We cannot prove His existence, but we can bear witness to our encounter with Him. We cannot claim Him as the direct author of our traditions, but we can let ourselves be guided by the great depths of faith which that life-pattern has fostered. Ultimately we cannot convince anybody of Judaism's truth except by the example we provide in living the life of faith. Thus a hasidic master could say of Abraham:

> *He was the first (to make God's name great in the lower world), as our sages have said: Abraham converted the men and Sarah the women. Not that he tried to convince them by force of words to convert, but rather through the power of his service he was able to so bring divinity into the world that all the wicked turned to God and the fear of Him entered into their hearts.* [1]

The hasidic rebbe at his best knew that which so many of our educators have yet to learn: that the only religious teaching which matters is teaching through the example of one's own life. This hasidic Abraham was able to offer no arguments: his own *avodah* was all he had to show. It is here that devotional mysticism comes closest to the existentialist position in modern religious thought, and it is thus no accident that Buber, in seeking an existential model for Jewish religiosity, was so drawn to hasidism. Hear the comment of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav on the Psalmist's "For I know that the Lord is great" (Psalms 135:5):

> *Said King David: "For* I *know," emphasizing the "I." The greatness of God is something that no one can communicate to his fellowman, or even to himself from one day to the next. That which is brilliantly clear to him on one day is something which he cannot tell even himself on the day that follows. That is why he said "For* I *know" – because this cannot be communicated at all.*

or in another formulation:

> *Faith is both hidden and revealed. It is hidden, because if you ask the person of faith to provide some reason for it, he will certainly not be able to give you any; faith only applies to those areas where there are no reasons. But it is also revealed, because to the one who has the faith it is all quite clear, as though he were seeing the object of his faith with his very eyes . . .* [2]

This indeed is the primary claim of all mysticism: that our knowledge of God comes first and foremost from the testimony of inner experience, an experience which (to be a bit less radical than Rabbi Nahman) is communicated only with the greatest of difficulty. Aware that

this knowing comes from within, and knowing how difficult this task of communication will be, the mystic turns back to tradition, to the biblical event or the liturgical phrase, seeking in it some channel both for understanding (communicating to self) and for sharing with others his own meeting with God. Scholem and others have shown us that the mystic generally strives to overcome whatever tension may exist between his own inner life and the claims of tradition, and that this new inner experience most often serves to deepen and renew the symbols of that traditional language which the mystic has inherited. In seeking to express the ineffable, the religious human being has an overpowering need for the depth-expression which is only possible through the archaic power of classical symbols.

The problem with our religious education today, on all levels, from Hebrew school right through seminaries, is that we are seeking to teach historical tradition without the cultivation of inwardness. The mystic knew well that such teaching is nothing but the planting of dry sticks; it is no wonder that our efforts bear so little fruit. We Jews speak in horror of the young people from our community who are attracted to spiritual paths other than our own. We either think of them as traitors to a cause, or, if we are a bit more generous, as poor misguided souls. But that is completely missing the point! Where in our Jewish community have they been exposed to the spiritual heights that Judaism often has meant? What have they learned, whether they are Hebrew school dropouts or graduates of our finest higher institutions, about the rich pietism of a Bahya, about the contemplative life of the kabbalist, about religious community as lived in Safed, about the intensity of hasidic prayer – not as historical phenomena, mind you, but as potential examples for the cultivation of their own inner lives? We teach the tales and traditions either as though they were literally true (something most of us don't really believe) or in the context of more critical history, which tends to reduce the *torat hayim* to a mass of irrelevancies. The sad fact is that some of our most religiously sensitive people are giving up on Judaism because of our own failing, because the Judaism to which we have been exposed, and which we have then shared with them, is a Judaism that has lost its own essential spirit as a way of living in the presence of God.

The great question we face as we confront the new popularity of mysticism in our times is whether there will be any room for the authentic spiritual seeker in our heterodox Jewish community. Until now we have generally answered this in the negative, feeling that we have nothing to offer him or her and assuming that a Jew attracted to

mysticism will be best off in Lubavitch. What I want to propose is that we *davke* have a great need for such people within our own communities and can potentially foster in them an openness and creativity which Orthodox hasidism as practiced today will ultimately have to stifle. But we will not be able to keep such people until we have rabbis who know what it is to pray, until we have religious educators who don't condemn silent meditation as *goyish*, and until our synagogues are warm and intimate enough for the Shekhinah to enter. Granted, that may be a long way off – but we have hardly begun to move in those directions. We are, deservedly or not, *tofsei hatorah* (rabbinic authorities) for our generation. Will we be able to make that Torah accessible to those who want and need it most, reopening the channels of flow between private experience and collective tradition, or will we dismiss as "inauthentic" all attempts to reread the tradition in the light of contemporary religious needs?

THE TRUTH OF SYMBOLISM

Historic and philosophic truth-claims are gone for us; in the face of this, we seek a more personal relationship to the symbols of tradition. The point is that history and philosophy are ultimately irrelevant to the mystic, not because he rejects them (at least not in the case of Judaism) but because he chooses to operate on another level of reality. The mystic has learned to convert the great events recorded by tradition into symbols which express the ongoing inner revelation to which he has been exposed. The *terms* of his symbolic expression are inherited; the truth with which he fills them is the truth of his own religious life. This symbolic reality echoes with eternity and finds its truth in the present moment: Sinai is all-important not because it happened once and is recalled, but because it happens always and can happen *now* in the life of one who is open to it. When the rabbis said that all Jewish souls that were ever to exist were present at Sinai, they were opening the door to this mythic (in its most positive sense) type of reading. The Jew understands his own encounter with the divine in terms of his classic paradigms: those of the patriarchs, of the Exodus, of Sinai and the wilderness, of the Temple both standing and destroyed. *Yetziat mitzrayim,* for the hasidic master, is not an historical event but a paradigm for all experiences of spiritual liberation. It makes no real difference to such an approach whether the Hapiru tribes or group ever were in Egypt: the Torah's real demand is that *you* prepare yourself for liberation from bondage.

I do not mean to minimize the differences between ourselves and our ancestors. For the kabbalist, the level of *sod* was another level on which the event or scriptural passage was true, in addition to that of historic *peshat.* All the levels of truth correspond for him. Ours is a fragmented universe; kabbalah as a grand system of Truth will not work for us more than will any other such system. We who have so little *peshat*, however, need not deny ourselves the right to *sod*. We may with all legitimacy say that while the historicity of a given event is highly unlikely to be confirmed, we read Scripture as a faith-community as well as in the role of critical scholars; as people of faith this event continues to address our collective spirit. If we want Torah to live for us, we must again learn what the author of the Zohar and the Ba'al Shem Tov had to learn: to see our inheritance of tales and practices as myths and symbols in the highest sense, as gateways to a path of spiritual life. This will be the content of the truth-claim that we can continue to make in our age. We make no claims of superior or unique access to God or to the truth. We do vigorously state, however, that the life of Torah has successfully been witness to God's presence in the world through the most devastating history which any human group has known. The continuous longing of the Jew to seek God's face and our willingness to affirm Him throughout time are the true sources of Jewish faith. Sinai, like the *akedah,* is not true because it happened once, but because it happened a thousand times, because it will happen forever so long as there are Jews. In this sense, the truth of symbolism may come to be far more "orthodox" than that of history, a fact recognized in certain Catholic theological circles for a long time.

THE TRUTH OF FANTASY

But you are still not satisfied. "Is it true?," you ask me, by which you mean, "Did the event happen?" And to this I have to answer both "yes" and "no." I have absolutely no evidence that any of it happened, except for the testimony of the faithful – but that is all the evidence I need. It is true, if you will, the way the psychoanalyst believes that dreams are true, in that they express the deepest longings, needs, fears, and secrets of the dreamer's life. It is of only secondary relevance to today's psychoanalyst to ask whether the dream represents a recollection of some external event that took place in the person's early life: the dream has taken on a reality of its own. It may indeed be fantasy, but fantasy may contain that dreamer's truth in a way that an external account of his life could never embody. And if we are to admit that our

religious truth is the truth of fantasy, indeed it is only the kabbalist who can be our guide.

Allow me to share with you a brief passage from the Zohar which expresses this level of religious knowing far better than I could on my own.

> *Rabbi Judah began with the verse: "Her husband is known in the gates" (Proverbs 31:23). The Holy One, blessed be He, is elevated and glorious, utterly hidden and transcendent. No one has come into the world, since the time of Creation, who can understand either Him or His wisdom. Because He is so hidden, neither those above or those below are able to cleave to Him, so that all of them say: "Blessed be the glory of God from His place!" The lower creatures say: "He must be above!" as Scripture says: "His glory is above the heavens" (Psalms 113:4). But the upper ones say: "He is below!" as Scripture says: "Thy glory is upon all the earth" (Psalms 57:6). Thus everyone, both above and below proclaims: "Blessed is the glory of God from His place!" (Ezekiel 3:12), for He is unknown and no one can grasp Him. And you say: "Her husband (i.e. God, the Shekhinah's spouse) is known in the gates"?*
>
> *But surely He is known in the gates* (she'arim)*; He is known and is cleaved to according to what each person imagines* (mesha'er) *in his heart, each according to his own attainment in wisdom. Those are the* she'arim *through which He is known. But to really know Him – no one can reach this.*[3]

The whole universe is looking for God, says the mystic, but He remains beyond all ken. The only knowledge you have of Him is that which you find in your own heart, that which you imagine. Of course there is an ultimate faith that the heart's vision contains a representation of a truth beyond itself, but that is not stated here. We are reminded of Kafka's parable of the imperial message, that message which, while intended for you alone, can never reach you, except that "you sit by the window as evening falls and dream it to yourself." We may also be reminded of Wiesel's post-Holocaust quip in answer to the Vizhnitser rebbe who asked him whether the stories he told were true, that is, whether the events really happened. Wiesel's answer, to paraphrase: There are events that happened, but nevertheless aren't true; there are also events that are true, even though they never happened. "Truth" exists on many levels; the truth of faith is simply not the same as that of history.

We should not even be afraid to admit the large component of fantasy which is present in the poetic speech of our religious expression.

One of the elements I seek in kabbalah is the legitimization of the life of fantasy and religious imagination. Again an important model for this enterprise is Rabbi Nahman Bratslaver, in his turn from conventional homiletics to storytelling. Rabbi Nahman's stories were elaborate creations of fantasy, intended to embody within them hidden allusions to the symbolic inner world in which he lived. We find in his writings a new respect for *koah hamedameh,* the imaginative faculty, a respect which he realized in the creation of these *sipurei ma'asiyot*. Rather than seeking to liberate man from fantasy, said Rabbi Nahman, the real job of the *tzaddik* is to provide a proper fantasy-life, one which will lead back to God and give expression to the deep and sacred truths which lie buried in every human heart. Critics have noted that Rabbi Nahman's contemporary, William Blake, thought in similar ways. Blake's prophetic and fantastic works were in a certain sense written with a political purpose: to liberate men's minds from the bonds of reason and to restore to them the freedom of imagination which life in the incipient modern world was taking from them.

Some of you may also recognize that this reevaluation of fantasy has a particular location in the history of psychoanalytic theory and practice. The Freudian may have believed that dream and fantasy embodied men's longings, but he also thought that the task of the therapist was to free man from illusion, so that he be better able to confront and thus to function in the "real" world. The goal of Freudian analysis is liberation from fantasy. In this sense, Richard Rubenstein is very deeply a Freudian; his God, as we have seen, is the truth beyond all self-delusion, the Nothingness we must learn to face if we are to become mature enough to admit the naked truth. More recent figures in psychoanalytic thought are calling this model into question, as is clear from the writings of such thinkers as Norman O. Brown, Theodore Roszak, and R.D. Laing. There is no such creature, they discover, as a human being without fantasies. And if there is to be one, or if this is to be our goal, woe to us. Creativity requires dreaming, and the ability to dream and fantasize creatively is essential to our humanity. In a most daring reading of Scripture, Rabbi Nahman interprets *na'aseh adam betzalmenu kedemutenu* as "Let us make man in our likeness – with an imagination"![4] It is not the rational faculty which gives people access to divinity, but rather the imagination, the only vehicle people have for knowing God. Here perhaps is one of the clearest statements of that which separates the mystic from the rationalist in Judaism: is it *sekhel* or *medameh* that is

meant by "the image of God"? Is it man the thinker or man the dreamer and symbol-maker who most nearly approaches divinity?

This is not to say, of course, that *all* fantasy is good. Rabbi Nahman sought to create sacred fantasy in order to fight the negative and dangerous fantasies which fill men's minds. Before we too readily embrace the life of the imagination, we must remember that myths, dreams, and fantasies had at least as great a part in creating the horrors of Nazism as did the rationality with which the machinery of death was organized. Fantasy in the abstract is amoral; it is only the kind of fantasy we create by which we will be judged. We do not speak here of a privatized life of the imagination as a Jewish religious ideal, but rather of renewing the richness that once existed in our collective fantasy production. Because Judaism has always insisted that the religious imagination be tied to an ethical structure, we need not be overly afraid of allowing ourselves the prerogative of the symbol-maker and dreamer. If there is again to be true religious creativity within Judaism, we must be willing to allow ourselves to reopen the channels which flow between private experience and collective myth.

We twentieth-century Jews suffer, among other things, from a terrible impoverishment of the imagination. In this sense, the spirit of positivism has not served us well. The notion that religion is to be established on the basis of credal statements which you either accept or reject – "Can you or can you not sign on the dotted line?" – is based on an ultimately shallow understanding of the life of faith. Our rabbis could create verbal pictures which still excite the reader well over a thousand years later. Did they believe in all that they said, in some of the fantastic tales they told about biblical heroes, for example? Did Rabbi Akiba really believe that there were two hundred and fifty plagues at the Red Sea, fifty for each finger? Or was he saying: "If you're going to let your imagination go, do so as richly as you can!"

The kabbalist offers a profound grasp of the relationship between truth and fantasy in the religious mind. On one level, he accepts the fact that God is beyond all knowing. When the Zohar speaks of *eyn sof,* it is speaking of a God who – or which – is beyond description or relationship. It is even clear to him that both good and evil have their roots in this ultimate unknown which in itself is beyond both of them. But the kabbalist also knows that the Jew – the human – has deep religious needs which can only be satisfied by the richest fruits of the religio-literary imagination. Once you know that God is nought but *eyn sof,* you can then turn around and affirm all the imagery in the world. God is not only an elder seated on the throne, but is sun and moon,

flowing river and endless sea, male and female, forever joined in cosmic embrace, great mother giving birth to the universe, and all the rest. Because you know that your symbols are not ultimate, they do not become frozen into a spurious claim for literal truth. It is paradoxically God's transcendence of all symbols which allows man the freedom to exercise his creativity as a symbol-maker. The medieval pietist author of *Anim Zemirot* knew this well; it is no credit to our liturgical sensitivity that we have relegated his incredibly profound poem to that portion of the service when we hope few will have to undergo the embarrassment of reading him.

My call for the renewal of religious imagination is not one which is meant to dwell in the realm of theory alone. I address you as educators and preachers as well as simply Jews concerned with theological matters. Have we been right in fostering a model of Jewish education which seeks to "liberate" children from myth and fantasy by early initiation into critical-historical inquiry? Is this not all *sekhel*, with very little room for *medameh*? The child's imagination is and should be fired by fantasy; children are not ultimately concerned with whether the fairy tales they read or the science fiction plots they watch *really* happened or not. Might we not do better as religious educators to enrich rather than impoverish the fantasy production of the young? One wonders whether the *Targum Sheni* or the *Tze'enah u-Re'enah* aren't better models than Ibn Ezra for teaching the Bible to young children. The same is true of our preaching, and even more of our liturgy. While most of us do not have the self-confidence – or indeed the talent – to follow Rabbi Nahman's lead in replacing sermonizing with original storytelling, it would be good to allow something of that quality to infuse our words from the pulpit. As for our liturgy, its growing impoverishment is clear. Where are the angels who used to people our prayerbook? Is there some law of reason that says you can believe in a God who reveals His will to man, but not believe in angels? Where are the *ushpizin* for our Sukkah or our dancing in the moonlight at *kiddush levanah*? These are things of which our religious imagination is born; we should not be too quick to let the rationalist apologetic deprive us of them.

THE NEED FOR REMYTHOLOGIZING

I have tried to seek out, in this presentation, four areas in which the model of Jewish mysticism should prove instructive to us in our attempts at formulating a contemporary theology of Judaism.

1. The reassertion of faith after the Holocaust, not as escape from or

denial of reality, but as the ultimate act of courage in the face of the absurd.

2. The revival of spirituality or inwardness as the central core of our lives as religious Jews, or as religious human beings seeking life in God's presence through the practice and study of traditional Judaism.

3. An assertion that the truth-claims of our tradition are to be renewed on the level of mythic and symbolic truth, and that the right of these claims to guide our collective spiritual lives is not dependent upon their historic or metaphysical validation.

4. A call for the reopening of the channels of religious imagination and creative sacred fantasy in various areas affecting the life of the Jewish religious community.

We have seen the theology of despair which comes out of the Holocaust; we must now go beyond it to a renewal of real life. We have lived through the dead end of historicism as an ideology and have been crippled by the conclusions of the critical consciousness; *we must now move from the critical to the post-critical age in our religious formulations.* We have seen the unidimensional flatness and poverty which positivism and historicism have lent to our once sacred existence. The need for demythologizing is past; *a remythologizing of the religious consciousness is what this hour calls upon us to create.* And here it is the kabbalist, the one who has most successfully accomplished that task in our past, who is to be our historic guide and mentor.

[1] Rabbi Shelomo of Radomsk, *Tif'eret Shelomo, Purim,* ed. Jerusalem, 1963, 83a.
[2] *Liqqutey MoHaRaN* 62:5; *Sihot ha-RaN* 1.
[3] Zohar 1:103a–b. See also the particularly illuminating comment by the *Ketem Paz* ad loc.
[4] *Liqqutey MoHaRaN* II 5:9

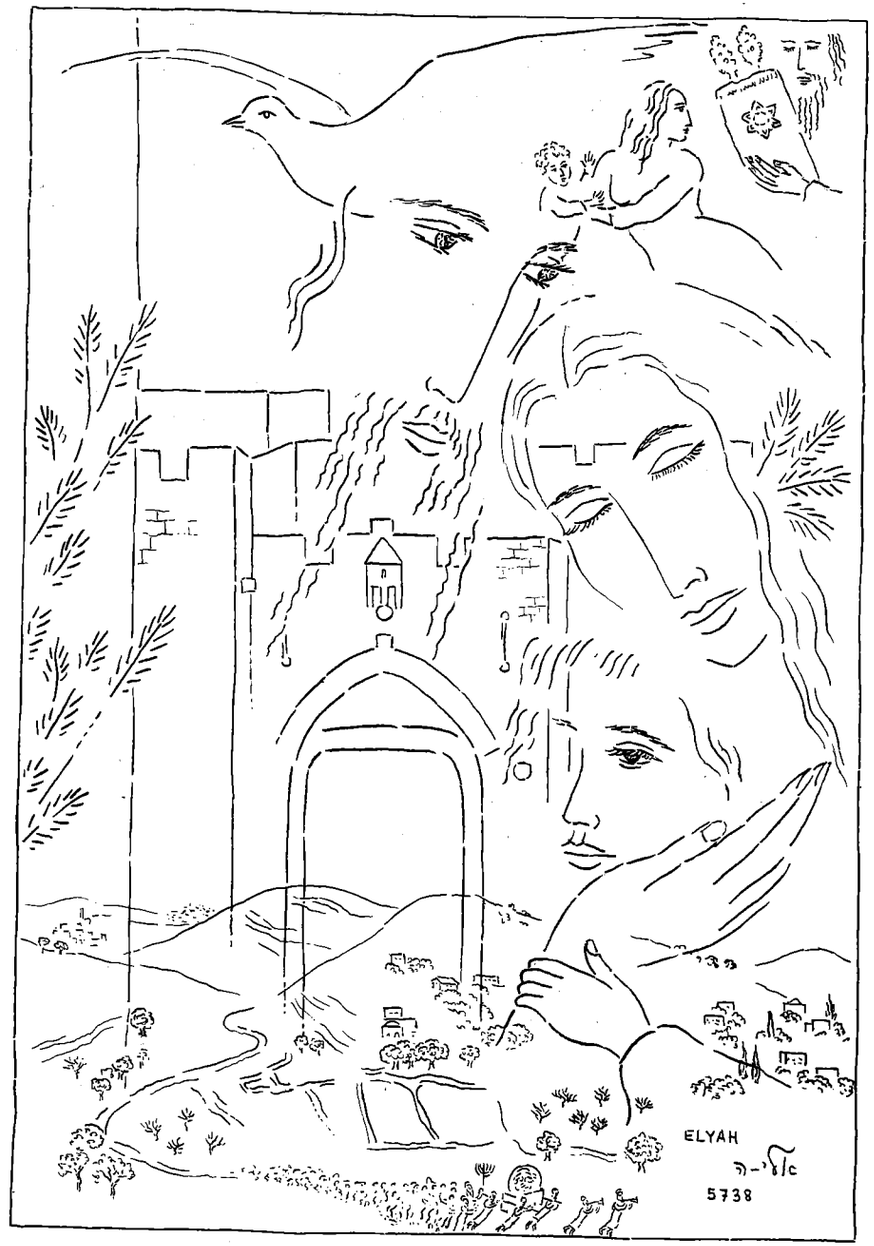

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Table of Contents

On Going to Press 2

Worlds, Angels and Men *Adin Steinsaltz* 4

Childhood Mysteries *Yitzhak Shenhar* 15

The Role of Jewish Mysticism in a Contemporary Theology of Judaism *Arthur E. Green* 25

Generation *Nessa Rapoport* 42

Study in Israel *Mordecai Beck* 43

A Moving Letter from the Archives 52

The Generations of Noah *Zanvel Klein* 54

From the Sources
The Path of the Just *Moshe Haim Luzzatto* 56

The Voice of Jacob *Stéphane Moses* 72

Money, Labor and Land in the Torah *André Amar* 81

About our Contributors 92