Theology on the Far Side of Myth

Arthur Green and Or Rose

We wish to thank Rabbi Gillman for initiating this thought-provoking discussion. As students of the Jewish mystical tradition — an ancient body of literature that articulates the unique relationship between myth and theology in evocative and imaginative terms — we are particularly interested in exploring this subject in a contemporary framework.

It must be stated at the outset that we are sympathetic to Gillman's use of the term myth. Particularly powerful at this moment when the world is so polarized by competing truth claims (both religious and political), his interpretation of the word myth reminds us of the importance of maintaining an epistemological humility even in the midst of heated debate on matters of ultimate concern.

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Given the limits of this forum, we shall focus our attention on one central issue raised in his article — the challenges of entering a broken myth, of piecing together the sacred fragments of our lives in the face of theological uncertainty. This process is, as Gillman notes briefly, complicated. It requires several stages of reflection and questioning. One important step in that process is admitting to the pain of losing one's theological "naivete." Whether this happens in childhood, adolescence, or adulthood (it likely occurs at various moments in all three life stages), losing this "naivete" can be a disorienting and troubling experience that must be acknowledged and mourned. While this might ultimately lead to positive growth and transformation, the shadow side of this experience cannot be denied.

Related to this is the fact that, when we attempt to enter a broken myth, we do so tenuously, without the confidence or sense of authority that we may have once felt. If, for example, Sinai is no longer a literal event, then we no longer have the weight of divine authority to motivate our commitments. This leads us to ask a difficult question, for which there is no easy answer: Is it ever possible to reconstruct our religious myths so that they inspire serious religious commitment in thought and deed, or does our new consciousness prevent us from ever engaging the tradition wholeheartedly? Further, if we enter our broken myths with appropriate hesitation and uncertainty, what do we have to offer those who turn to us for guidance and support? What can we say to the convert, the school child, or the adult seeker?

As we attempt to reclaim our myths, we must also carefully examine our motivations for doing so. What moves us to return? Is it nostalgia, emotionalism, or perhaps our aesthetic sensibilities? While these factors may be important to our reclamation project, we must also ask, is there a theological impulse guiding our decision? Rabbi Gillman tells us that he is not a literalist. However, he does not reveal the content of his own mythologized beliefs. Does this mean that after one admits to the power of myth, there is nothing left to say theologically? In other words, can one make any *faith* claims on the far side of myth?

Our response to this question is yes. One can address myth through the use of a post-literalist hermeneutic, drawing truths from the tradition that transcend the details of any particular narrative. Sinai is true not because God may or may not have spoken to the Israelites in the wilderness, but because we have experienced the awesome presence of the Divine in our own wanderings and wonderings. The same is true of the creation story. While the details of this legend may no longer speak to us, we have been touched by the immanent Divine presence within the natural order or during peak creative moments.

Entering a broken myth means that we accept living a life of theological tension. A mature theol-

ogy holds the paradox of the human condition in its embrace. The Zohar, the greatest of all Jewish mystical works, makes this point eloquently when it teaches that the word *Elohim* (the generic name for God in the Bible) actually consists of two separate words: *mi* (who) and *eleh* (these). Parsing the name *Elohim* in this manner teaches us that when speaking of God we must always do so in two modes. One is through the use of constructive theological language, through the mode of *eleh* — "these" are the things that we are willing to affirm about God. The other is through negative theological language, through the mode of *mi* — we accept the fact that, beyond all of our attempts to articulate a vision of divinity, there exists the God of "who?" — the One who transcends all human language and imaginings.

As theologians we believe that the project of reweaving the fabric of our religious lives requires that we engage, unapologetically, in discussions about God. At the same time we acknowledge that, in our spiraling search for the Infinite, we inevitably return to a place of questioning and mystery.

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Friends,

I want to take this opportunity to share with you news from the *Sh'ma* editorial office. We have just begun a strategic planning process to learn more about how the journal can find, serve, and grow its readership. The process includes being both imaginative and practical — looking at our vision and our financial stability. We have drafted statements of purpose and vision, which we share with you here.

The purpose of *Sh'ma* is to enrich the texture and diversity of Jewish life by expanding the parameters of Jewish conversations. What issues find their way to our communal agenda? And what do we discuss around the shabbes table? We envision *Sh'ma* to be the forum for introducing ideas and facilitating the evolution of discussion. We hope that the journal encourages creative thinking about long-standing issues as well as issues only emerging in the 21st century. A readers' survey to evaluate your opinions and suggestions will be sent during the next months. Please respond candidly.

You should have recently received a letter as part of the annual *Sh'ma* Appeal. Like most publications, subscriptions and grants only cover part of the costs we incur. *Sh'ma* depends on you — our friends and readers — to keep the journal financially healthy. Please look for the Appeal card in the mail and respond generously. Gift subscriptions (only $15/year for subscribers) introduce new readers to *Sh'ma* while building a greater reach for the journal. Share *Sh'ma* with your friends and family!

The year 2002 is approaching, and we are starting to plan our Purim issue. At this somber moment in our history, humor is an important piece of our identity and continued strength. Send your ideas for Purim *Sh'ma* to SusanB@JFLmedia.com by January 15th.

We are planning to expand the December issue of *Sh'ma*, which addressed Ethics and Fighting Terrorism, into a book this winter. The book will include additional essays, a selection of High Holiday sermons drawing on Jewish sources and teachings responding to the attack, and a section focusing on issues related to families and education — how to teach and talk about these ethical questions with children. We are looking for a sponsor for the book, which provides the opportunity to dedicate the volume in honor or in memory of a loved one. Please contact me for further details on sponsorship.

Sh'ma recognizes the value of dialogue on the issues we raise. Your "Letters to the Editor" can be sent via e-mail to susan.berrin@JFLmedia.com or via post to P.O. Box 9129, Newton, MA 02464. We will try to make available more space within the journal over the next year for publishing these letters.

I'll look forward to hearing from you.

B'vracha,

Susan Berrin

Susan Berrin, Editor

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Sh'ma שמע

What is religious and historical truth? This issue of Sh'ma *addresses the most fundamental questions of faith and how we develop our personal theologies. Several leading Jewish thinkers and educators reflect on the sanctity and authority of the Torah.*

The Problematics of Myth

Neil Gillman

When I was a rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, theology was taught as a dimension of Jewish intellectual history, what the great Jewish thinkers of old believed. With the notable exception of Mordecai Kaplan and Abraham Joshua Heschel, our teachers were not overly concerned with what we or our congregants-to-be might believe. When I began to teach, I felt it was my responsibility to help my students develop a personal theology that would cohere with the rest of their Seminary education and shape their teaching and preaching as Conservative rabbis. But then, they had the right to expect that I too would share my own theology.

How one understands revelation determines how one deals with the authority of Torah on all matters of Jewish belief and practice.

My first encounter with the theological uses of the term myth was in Paul Tillich's *Dynamics of Faith*. I first read Tillich for my doctoral exams at Columbia, but it was only when I began to teach theology to JTS rabbinical students that I felt the full impact of his thought. That slim book remains central in my teaching and writing to this day.

My core issue was revelation. It continues to be, for me, the central theological issue: how one understands revelation determines how one deals with the authority of Torah on all matters of Jewish belief and practice.

My Seminary education had successfully subverted any literalist understanding of the central Jewish revelational event as described in Exodus 19-20. I was taught that the Torah was a composite document, edited around the 5th century C.E., borrowing from the literature of the surrounding ancient Near Eastern cultures. That "critical" approach to the study of the Bible also questioned the historicity of the biblical narratives, including the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Sinai. The evidence for these conclusions struck me as persuasive. In addition, I had begun to question the very possibility of any human attempt to capture God's nature or activity in literal terms. I could no longer believe that God literally "descends" on Sinai or "speaks" the words of Torah. If God were truly God, then God could not literally "speak." But then what was Torah? Whence its sanctity? Its authority? More broadly, what was the epistemological status of any theological claim? Finally, as a rabbi, how could I justify teaching and advocating the bulk of Jewish practice which, I continued to believe, remained central to any authentic understanding of Judaism? It was in this context that I reverted to the notion of myth.

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