**A REPONSE TO STEVEN KEPNES**

**NOTE: *Conservative Judaism* 65:4 (Summer 2014) contained a review/essay by Steven Kepnes entitled “God Is One, All Else Is Many: A Critique of Green and Artson.” Because the journal is ceasing publication, there is no opportunity for this response to be published there.**

Steven Kepnes, a philosophy professor at Colgate University, has some advice for what he sees as a flailing Conservative movement. Define yourselves around a theological agenda, he says. Instead of just staking out the territory between Orthodoxy and Reform on such halakhic issues as women’s empowerment and personal status, take up the cudgels against the “New Age” Jewish theologies of Arthur Green and Brad Artson, where the connection of faith to Jewish practice is “extremely attenuated and weak.” A robust Conservative (and conservative!) defense of the theological language of the siddur, buttressed by Maimonides, will be just what the doctor ordered.

Of course Kepnes has every right to say that authentic Jewish theology is that of the siddur, without any fancy reinterpretations. (I know that theology well, and I discuss it in the second chapter of my *Radical Judaism*, which is the subject of his broadside.) His position strikes me as reminiscent of that of R. Moshe Taku, a 13th century Ashkenazi intellectual who vociferously opposed the new ways of thinking represented by both Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah. “Gimme that old time religion” is a tempting stance. I, for one, have no objection to a Judaism based on the faith of the siddur, with just a couple of small exceptions. The problem is that insistence on it excludes all those who have difficulty believing it, myself included. The many positive responses to my book that I have received over the past four years tell me that I am not unique in that difficulty. I don’t think you’d want to read all those nice people out of Conservative Judaism. Not much of a growth strategy, I’d say.

There are some things that are frankly annoying in this review. As a well-trained philosopher, Kepnes should know how to read carefully, and to read a text in its entirety. He has not displayed great skill in either of those realms in this review. To begin with, after saying correctly that “they do not explicitly associate themselves with New Age Judaism,” he then goes on to repeatedly link Artson and me to that term (I stopped counting at ten times). Let me say clearly that “I am not, and never have been, a member of” the New Age. In fact I had long arguments with my dear (and much missed!) friend and mentor Reb Zalman Schachter about this question. He was a believer in the Aquarian revolution; I was not. I am not a New Age Jew, just an aging Jew – and that is nothing new. I suspect that this “guilt by association” with the New Agers is a cheap way of refusing to engage seriously with what I have to say, and I find that annoying in a philosopher. Kepnes should also know that my association with Reconstructionism ended a couple of decades ago. I know virtually nothing about “native American paganism” or yoga, and shamefully little about “the Hindu Vedas” or Buddhism, all of which Kepnes seems to think are my true sources of inspiration. Nonsense.

I am affiliated with no Jewish denomination, quite happily so. I am, however, quite clearly and openly, a neo-Hasidic Jew. (I owe much gratitude to the Conservative movement, whose institutions trained me, but I came to feel many years ago that this was not a proper ideological fit.) I spend most of my intellectual time studying, teaching, translating, and pondering Hasidic texts written in the late 18th century. I read these, of course, as a contemporary American Jew, and ask what meaning they can have for us, how we might render their essential teaching accessible and palatable to 21st century seekers, among whom I count myself. A neo-Hasidic Jew, to my mind, is one who says that the spiritual revolution within Judaism undertaken by the early Hasidic masters, mostly aborted by the need to battle modernity, has important lessons to offer Jews (and perhaps others) in our time. To do so, these texts have to be read selectively, universalized, cleansed of a deep misogeny, etc. I do not claim to believe all the same things that Hasidim did two hundred fifty years ago. Of course not. But it is my engagement with this literature that has been the essential determinant of my theological language.

I try – I’m sure inadequately – to be careful about that language. I thus cringe when Kepnes says that in my thought “God is seen as *part of* both humans and the world (italics mine)” and again “God *is part of* a ‘single unifying substratum of all that is.’” God is not part of humans and the world; humans and the world are aspects of the whole that is Y-H-W-H. There is a great difference. *Hu mekomo shel ‘olam ve-eyn ha-‘olam mekomo*. God is not *part of* any substratum; God *is* that substratum.

I have dealt with the question of the “separateness” of God and world in the book (p. 18f.) by suggesting “not an ontological otherness but an otherness of perspective.” Clearly this does not suffice for Kepnes (who is of course a neo-Maimonidian, not a Taku disciple, and as self-assured about that viewpoint as Catholic neo-Thomists once were), but I would like to know why. And what is the locus of this ontological Other? Does it “reside” somewhere outside the universe? And just what would such an assertion mean in a contemporary scientific context? By contrast, I have suggested (on the same page) a theology that indeed has a transcendence about it, but that “transcendence dwells within immanence.” I think I explain what I mean quite clearly there, but I don’t hear Kepnes engaging with me on this key question. As a shorthand, I speak of Y-H-W-H (I am in fact quite strict about not writing or pronouncing the name) as a reversal of the letters of HaWaYaH or “existence,” but assert that mystery or infinity enters in that moment of reversal (p. 24, 33). Similarly, I find it trivializing or dismissive for Kepnes to claim that I say that “God has no mind, no consciousness…” when I say quite clearly that “all mind and all consciousness ever to exist are part of the One…All minds are thus one with Mind, as all beings are contained within Being (24f.).” I understand that Kepnes does not like this; he seems to want a God of willful consciousness and intent, very much like a human being. I would ask him to push Maimonides (including his son’s reading of him) into the 21st century, just as I have pushed the Hasidic masters, and to see what results.

An understanding of the oneness of God as all-embracing, inclusive of all beings, is most clearly stated in the letter by the *Sefat Emet* that I have quoted in several of my writings (first and most fully in *The Language of Truth*, p. xxxvif.), but also in RJ, p. 77f. and elsewhere). It is the theology of R. Shne’ur Zalman of Liadi (see *Tanya*, part II) for which R. Hayyim of Volozhin excoriated him. All the Kabbalists, from the 13th century on, understood the unity of God to be dynamic rather than static, therefore complex rather than “simple.” A number of them, those whose teachings best nourish my particular soul, ranging from R. Moshe Cordovero to the Hasidic figures just mentioned, described this unity in all-embracing terms. Yes, I may express it more boldly than they sometimes do, but my view proceeds directly from my reading of theirs and is not essentially different, though translated into 21st century language. Now Kepnes has a right to prefer Maimonides here, but not to tell me that my choice from within the tradition is either “pagan” or “Hindu.”

It is regarding the third chapter of my book, entitled “Torah” but dealing also with *mitsvot*, where Kepnes most reveals himself as a careless reader. He correctly says that I find myself commanded to two essential *mitsvot* by the voice of the immanent God. The first, as he says correctly, is “Know Me,” the imperative to be aware and mindful of the divinity presence within all of being. I take this as the basis for all the *mitsvot beyn adam la-makom,* “between humans and God,” understanding that the specific forms are all human creations (Does he disagree?) that emerge as our response to that great call. Yes, Judaism was created by Jews, evolving through the course of our history. But it was created in response to what I truly understand as the voice of God, the call to us to create such a community of religious awareness. The second *mitsvah,* which he misses entirely, is that of sharing this awareness with all other humans (97f.). That means seeing to it that they are in condition – sufficiently well-fed, cared for, loved, meaningfully employed, and all the rest – to hear the word of God, or the religion emerging from our encounter with that divine call. This is the basis for all the *mitsvot beyn adam le-havero*, “between person and person.”

There is a theology of *mitsvot* laid out here, along with several other rubrics to be found in a close reading of that chapter. It is a theology that seeks to find an imperative voice within the context of an immanentist theology. Kepnes essentially ignores it, choosing instead to just whine about the “extremely attenuated and weak” connection I seem to have to the *mitsvot.*

What does he have to offer in its place (I confess to not yet having read his book.)? A neo-Kantian heteronymous Commander? I may be an aging Jew, but Hermann Cohen is *really* getting old! Surely Kepnes knows enough about the history and anthropology of religion to understand that the forms of the ritual *mitsvot* are all of human and historic origin. Just how does the Commander from Beyond come to care that we don *tefillin* that obviously descend from apotropaeic amulets once worn by Assyrian kings? I ask this as a Jew who happens to love *mitsvat tefillin*, one with which I currently engage on a daily basis. I have found a *ta’am mitsvah* that works for me, one that is both intellectually honest and spiritually compelling. If this is to be dismissed as pagan Judaism, I need to know what Kepnes has to offer in its place, meeting those same criteria.

Yes, I understand there are some bad people in the world. “The rabbis believed that Torah and its laws were given by God as an antidote to the *yester ra* and to shore up the *yester tov*.” Indeed that is what the rabbis said. But “the rabbis said” is a historical claim, not a theology. There is far too much of that in Kepnes’s treatment, posing Green (and Artson, who I presume will speak for himself) against rabbinic tradition, against the Torah, against the siddur, against the RaMBaM. But invoking those authorities does not a contemporary theology make. In fact, as I regularly teach my rabbinical students, the *yester ra’* versus *yester tov* is one of two moral models offered in our tradition. The other is the model of *Elohai, neshemah she-natata bi tehorah hi*, “My God, the soul You have placed within me is pure.” This becomes the model of pure or divine soul surrounded by *kelipot*, much developed by the Kabbalists. Thus Kepnes’s claim that “the ancient rabbis believed…that humans are not naturally holy beings” is not universally held within the tradition. Of course I am working from a part of Judaism that saw only Jews as endowed with divine souls and capable of raising up sparks of holiness from all of life, a limitation I find need to correct in the transition from a Hasidic to a neo-Hasidic reading.

It is hard for me to believe that one who has read my lengthy treatment of *tselem elohim* in the fourth chapter of *Radical Judaism* (120-131) does not think I see anything distinctive about humanity that separates us from the rest of existence. Again, Kepnes chooses to ignore and denounce, rather than to engage. I write about the soul (129-131), despite his seeming claim that I do not believe in it. No, I do not think we are the final goal of evolution; I believe the evolutionary process continues (31). If we do not destroy this planet, I do like to think of a future generation of beings who will look back on us as primitive ancestors, perhaps indeed debating as to whether we fall within their purview of the “human.”

This is not the first time the question: “But how can a Jew like you pray?” has come up in response to *Radical Judaism*. The fact is that I am a praying Jew, using rather traditional liturgy, and the life of prayer is very important to me, even central to my religious life. I wrote in *Seek My Face* (xxiii) that “Religion begins not with doctrine, not with tradition, but with the need to pray. Theology comes only later, the mind’s reflection on what the heart already knows.” I still stand by those words. I am currently working on a Hebrew version of *Radical Judaism* (eventually to appear as a revised edition in English as well, I hope), where I find myself adding a long excursus on prayer at the end of Chapter Three. For many years I have been working on a commentary to the prayerbook, where I make some of the links between my own thought and the ways I read the siddur and pray from its text. I suspect that it is hardly one that would make Professor Kepnes happy. But I agree that there is a certain gap between the language and tone of *Radical Judaism* and some of my other writings, where the rather highly devotional Judaism I live is perhaps better expressed.