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seriously considering the possibility of ordaining gays and lesbians. But intermarriage and patrilineal descent remain forbidden because, to quote the movement's favorite slogan, "we are a halakhic movement!"

I have spent years trying to resolve these sometimes competing understandings of halakhah into a coherent theological position. Franz Rosenzweig, Mordecai Kaplan, and Abraham Joshua Heschel serve as my guides. While I had hoped that my students, my rabbinic colleagues, and at least some lay Conservative Jews would welcome these efforts, I have met with limited success.

My position is roughly the following. I have become increasingly impatient with the claim that Conservative Judaism is "a halakhic movement." If anything, it is a "selectively halakhic movement." It is halakhic when it chooses to be halakhic. Whatever authority we grant halakhah in our lives is grounded not in God, but rather in the communities that crafted Torah in the first place, and now in our own. That position inevitably relativizes halakhic authority. I see no way to avoid that conclusion. But then, I am asked, why keep kosher or observe Shabbat? Answer: because we choose to obligate ourselves. But isn't that Reform? Answer: not

if we make different choices.

Originally I had believed that a candid articulation of this position would clarify the movement's ideology. But now I realize my student had been right all along. It's not that my theology is wrong-headed. It is simply irrelevant, first, because it is complicated to teach, much more complicated than the polar positions on the right and on the left. Jews out there just "don't get it," and don't care enough to exert the effort to "get it." Second, they don't need to get it because Jews make their Jewish decisions for many reasons; theology is rarely one of them. It may be important to some few, but certainly not to the vast majority, not even to many of my rabbinic colleagues, which is why this position is rarely explicitly taught, preached, or advocated.

Theology is not only an academic discipline; the sheer experience of living everyday life forces all of us to confront theological issues. It is the responsibility of the rabbi or educator to raise these private ruminations into conscious awareness. In some instances, the process will help clarify a denominational identity. At other times, it may not. But in both cases, the enterprise of doing Jewish theology will be validated. 

## Judaism and Creation Theology

Arthur Green

CREATION HAS BEEN the neglected question in modern Jewish theology. Partly because the issue did not fit well with the particularist agenda ("How are we different from our Christian neighbors?"), but also because we feared taking a clear position either supporting or opposing evolutionary theory, Jewish thinkers have remained mostly silent on the subject of life's origins. In contrast to prior ages, when theologies of creation served as the great font of life's meaning, moderns seek to separate the search for meaning from the question of origins. Since we can no longer say that the world was created "for the sake of the righteous," or "for Israel," or "for Torah," we find meaning in a Jewish life that has all too little to say about the big questions of how and why we all got here.

I believe that the urgent ecological agenda of the current century will change that situation quite radically. One of the most important roles of religion in the coming generations will

be to affect our behavior with regard to the natural world and its resources. Humanity's very survival demands a reeducation regarding consumption, population control, and a host of other issues — all having to do with our place in the fast-changing balances of the biosphere within which we exist. This conversation will perforce return us to the question of our place in the natural order and the process that led us to our now inescapable responsibility of stewardship over the existence of much more than our own species.

The current debates in some Christian circles about Creationism and Intelligent Design leave most Jews cold. We are not fundamentalists or apologists for untenable theories of origin. Jews have embraced science since the beginning of the modern age; we accept Darwin and the developments of evolutionary biology since his time. It is to physicists rather than Kabbalists (though they sometimes sound similar!) we turn to try to understand

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being's origins in the first emanations out of the black hole of primal nothingness.

But what does all this have to do with *God*? Assuming that the word "God" points, however inadequately, to ultimate reality and not merely to a human idea or a social construct, God surely must have some place in our thinking about how life came to be. Do we believe with the I. D. people that life is too complex to have developed on its own, that there must be a great brain with a plan behind it all? Or are we with the current Pope and the more sophisticated (or "casuistic"?) Catholic thinkers who accept evolution as described by science, but insist that it must be willed by God to work that way?

I want to suggest a different sort of function for religious language. Once we enter the world of "God," it seems to me, we are no longer engaging in scientific or even philosophical discourse. There is nothing here that can be demonstrated by logical proofs or scientific experimentation. We must accept that situation fully and honestly. To speak of God is to address ourselves to a different level of discourse, to appeal to a quality of mind that has much more in common with the mythopoetic imagination than it does with rational truth-claims.


To be fully human, however, is to live on more than a single frequency of mind. Poetry, music, and contemplation are all geared to address us on a rung of mental reality quite different than that of scientific discourse. This is the inner place to which religion speaks. It reveals a more profound truth about reality than does science, but it cannot express that truth in a cold, discursive prose that is alien to its mythic way of thought.

Our age is urgently in need of a new religious language, one that can take the account of origins that has shaped our age and view it through a deeper lens, one that will see it as sacred drama, not merely as a series of meaningless accidents. This poetic reframing of the tale will have to capture the human imagination, inspiring us to live as we must, to love the world around us, and to find our place within it.

The daunting task I set out for the new religious poets may be made easier by pointing out that it has all been done before. The author of the grand opening chapter of Genesis tells a tale of harmony, of creation by a single God who expresses approval and delight for all that

He has made. Behind this tale, well known to both the author and his readers, was the familiar creation myth of the ancient Near East, one in which sky gods fought a great battle against the older gods of the sea, slaying them and setting out the earth on their carcasses. It is a tale of violence, aggression, and bloodshed, all quite hidden in the Genesis rewrite. We live in an era when a new creation account has taken hold, this one too filled with competition for survival among rival forces, fights to the finish, and constant extermination of weaker species.

A bold reframing of this tale is needed, one that will nourish a creative civilization much as Genesis did for so many centuries. The repeated affirmations of Genesis 1, "...and God saw that it was good," combined with the open-ended concluding phrase, "God rested from all the work that God created to be done," offered the message that ongoing human creativity had the potential to enter into this sphere of divine blessing.

It is natural that we Jews, bearers of the old tale for so long, should want to take a hand, along with others, in composing this next narrative. If we have anything to say about it, this new myth will also speak of human dignity, of divine love for each creature, and of the value of rest and reflection about the very much unfinished task of creation, the ongoing sacred drama that is the tale of all our lives. 

After reading Arthur Green's essay, post your "bold reframing of this [creation] tale" on [www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com).

## Discussion Guide

*Bringing together myriad voices and experiences in a sacred conversation provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of the ideas, we offer the following questions:*

1. Is theology relevant today?
2. Does pluralism dilute the "truth" of Judaism?
3. How do recent discussions about Intelligent Design fit with your understanding of the creation of the world?