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Theology Supplement

JUDAISM

AS A SPIRITUAL LANGUAGE: A JEWISH MYSTICISM FOR OUR AGE

ONE OF THE GREAT tragedies of Judaism in modern times is the frequent depiction of our religion as one empty of, or even inimical to, the profundities of individual religious experience. Our inability to speak without embarrassment about the inward and indeed intimate aspects of our faith has led more than a few seeking souls to believe that this tradition has no place for them, that there is no more here than empty ceremony, attachment to the past and ethnic identification. In more cases than we would like to admit, such seekers have turned elsewhere to find the face of God. The philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, who himself returned to intense Judaism from the brink of conversion, is said to have quipped that we lose some of our 'best' Jews, as well as our 'worst' ones, through conversion.

A Jewish hesitancy to speak publicly about the deeper mysteries of faith is nothing new to modern times. The *Mishnah* already warned Jews in the second century CE that certain subjects had best not be discussed in public and that the realm of visionary experience should be taught only individually and to one who was both wise and already possessed of an intuitive openness to such matters. Jews in post-Biblical

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times have always believed that there is a certain immodesty in going about speaking in the first person of one's own religious experiences. The greatest works of our mystical tradition veil such discussion in descriptions of the ancients, or even claim entirely to have been composed by those who lived long before their actual authors. Gershom Scholem, the greatest modern scholar of Jewish mysticism, noted that Jewish literature is remarkably devoid of personal 'confessions' or mystical diaries in which such experience is described directly.

At the same time, however, Judaism was possessed of a rich vocabulary, however modestly used, for discussion of religious states. Anyone who has delved into the devotional classics produced by Jews in the later Middle Ages or the teachings of the East European *chassidic* masters cannot but marvel at the sophisticated understanding of religious psychology and inwardness to which those works attest. Descriptions abound of the types of religious love, the nature of ecstasy, the rungs of inward prayer, and so forth. Only in modern times have these, too, seemed to disappear

from the Jewish vocabulary. Jews in the West were too busy with the business of emancipation and progress to look backward into the profundities of their own spiritual roots. Their search was to create a Judaism that was 'up-to-date' and consonant with the scientific worldview, a goal hardly conducive to the study of mystical sources. Among Jews in Eastern Europe and the Near East, communities that had long served as deep reservoirs of spiritual teaching, modern times witnessed an atrophying of the creative energies that are constantly needed to maintain the freshness of such teachings. Just as innovation in religious practice became largely frozen in response to fears of reform and assimilation, so did the vocabulary of the spirit come to be arrested somewhere in the eighteenth century, unable to release itself from old philosophical or *kabbalistic* terminology that no longer bore the power of conviction.

There is no more urgent task for contemporary Judaism than the creation of a religious language that will speak both profoundly and honestly to Jews in our time. Students of perception have long noted the deep relationship that exists between the categories of our language and the range of our ability to experience the universe in which we

live. We 'see' as many gradations of 'blue' as we can name; variations more subtle than our language escape our mind's eye. The mycologist who walks through the forest after a rain, armed with a rich vocabulary for the description of mushrooms, experiences a richness of life in that form which most of us would blithely ignore. So too with the life of the spirit. Jews and others who have the language to talk about such matters will be better equipped to open themselves to them.

Such a language will have to be deeply rooted in the sources of Judaism in order to speak with a profound voice. As we have said, the elements of such expression are richly to be found in our traditional literature. But in order to remain *honest*, another important requirement for the 'best' of our contemporary seekers, those of us who use that language will have to maintain a dual relationship to it. We who have studied religion critically and comparatively but who also seek to rejuvenate our spiritual lives within Judaism, will have to be both 'insiders' and 'outsiders' to our own religious language. To understand this dual role and its appropriateness, some basic questions of theology will have to be examined.

We begin our theological deliberation with a deceptively simple-seeming question: what does it mean to be a religious human being? Our question is asked from the standpoint of religious humanism, the belief that a faith commitment has a vital role to play in the human conduct of world affairs. What difference does it make in our worldview, attitude, or behaviour that we choose to call ourselves 'religious'?

The theology that emanates from this basic question takes humans and the realm of personal experience, rather than God and the origins of nature as its starting point. The position it assumes is thus to be described as 'existential', beginning with the reality of human existence. This term should also be taken in its other sense: there are life and death issues at stake in the basic questions of religion. Life without hope of ultimate meaning is not worth living. At the same time, this theological approach takes universal human questions rather than uniquely Jewish ones as its point of departure. The great Jewish theologies

have always sought to deal with universal questions of human existence. The *answers* such theologies provide are of course rooted in the Jewish tradition and speak the very particular language of Judaism. But the *questions* to which these answers are addressed are those of all humanity.

Our question also implies an assumption, or an article of faith, if you will: we claim that the religious is a specific and irreducible element of human experience. It can neither be wholly accounted for by social scientific explanations nor can it be explained away by reference to other aspects of human experience extrinsic to its own self-understanding. Such a claim clearly implies that moderns who have understood themselves in 'secular' terms over the course of the past century or more have cut themselves off from an ancient and previously all-pervasive aspect of human experience. This area of human activity, defined broadly as 'spiritual quest', 'search for God' or 'religious devotion', represents humanity at its most noble and profound; seeking to live in the presence of that which transcends us makes us most fully human.

The *chasidic* sources – of the early days, before *chasidism* took on the role of defending the tradition – bespeak a notion of *da'at* or 'awareness' as a central edifying value of religious life. The early *chasidic* master, like his counterpart in other traditions of mystical master/disciple instruction, saw himself as a teacher of spiritual wakefulness and awareness. In this he is differentiated from both the rabbi, teacher and arbiter of religious praxis, and the earlier *kabbalistic* master, transmitter of esoteric love. The *chasidic* teacher rather seeks to use the tradition and its language as a resource for the cultivation of the inner life. It is this task which he sees as the very core of religion. *Religion is the cultivation of an awareness that we live in relation to the transcendent.* The life of the religious person insofar as it is authentically that – is a life lived in constant striving for this awareness and in response to the demands made by it. All the institutions, practices, beliefs and taboos of religion are, from this point of view, centred around that awareness.

Every day in the life of a pious Jew is filled with the recitation of

blessings. Each of these is, ideally speaking, an opening of the heart to the 'eternal Thou', a reaching forth to embrace the transcendent in the intimacy of familiar form. The Jewish restrictions on eating are to serve as an aid to consideration of the dining table as a sacred altar, one at which fulfillment of our most basic and animal-like need is transformed into an act of religious devotion and awareness. The cycle of life and the cycle of the Jewish year both exist to lend us this awareness with a richness of variety that may be seen as highly sensitive to human need.

The actual experience of transcendence is both the beginning and end of this search for awareness. Experience, even of the most defined or inchoate sort, is the starting point of religion. Without some taste of transcendence we would not have patience for the great demands that religious discipline makes upon us; we would not see light at the end of the tunnel had we not known some light at the outset. The search is at one level the attempt to make constant, or at least regular, in human life a level of insight that has already existed in moments of spontaneous flash. This is called in biblical language *lema'an tizkeru*, 'so that you remember'. You perform the commandments, or live the religious life, so that you remember that 'I am the Lord thy God'. *We are commanded to recreate by means of disciplinary regimen the awareness that had once been given us in a moment of divine grace.* The realisation that life is studded with such moments is the gift granted in retrospect to the one who has walked far along the path.

What are the moments of such grace in our lives? The truth is that no one can recount them for anyone but him or herself. They may come in encounters with birth or death, in exhilaration or in reaction to great trauma. For many they come primarily in the context of human relations, especially in the shared intimacies of the loving relationship with a single other. Some experience moments of that special openness primarily in nature, standing in silent witness to sunrises, sunsets, stars, mountains and water. The special qualities of the morning and evening changes of light seem to be evocative of such feelings as those who made these our daily prayer-

times must have known so well. The point is that *everyone* has had such experiences though usually we have not labelled them as 'religious'. Moments of awesome awareness of transcendence are a vital part of that which makes us human.

Thus far, no ontological claims have been made, no mention of the 'existence' of God or of the objective reality of a realm transcendent to the universe as we generally know it. Our *experience* of transcendence remains an aspect of human experience; our claims remain in the realm of shared subjectivity rather than in that of objective or scientific truth.

Speaking about the religious reality 'in itself', fully cognizant of the philosophical impossibilities of that task, we remain somewhat uncomfortable with the English word 'God'. This term, rooted as it is in Germanic paganism, does little to express our personal reality. The Hebrew name, written consonantly Y-H-W-H, goes a lot further. It can be taken perhaps *midrashically*, as an arrested form of the verb 'to be', an impossible conflate of that verb in all its tenses at once. It refers to all that was, all that is, all that will be, taken poised amid collective singular motion. Y-H-W-H is, in short, all of being, but so unified and concentrated as to become Being. This is a deity beyond naming, one that fills all names as the soul fills the body, transcending them all as it fills them. *It is none other than the universe, yet it bespeaks a vision of that universe so utterly transformed by integration and unity as to appear to us as indeed 'other', a mirror of the universe's self that becomes Universal Self.* It is beyond the experience of our ordinary mind, even beyond articulation in any language except that of the mythmaker or poet, and yet it is none 'other' than we ourselves and the world in which we live, transformed as part of the transcendent vision.

Such a religious viewpoint is that of mystic and naturalist at once. It demands no 'leap of faith' as does the miracle-working deity of conventional Western theism. It requires rather a 'leap of consciousness', an openness to considering the possibility of a universe more whole, more beautiful, more perfect than the ordinary well-guarded mind could ever allow. It calls for

the sort of mind that can see Eden in our own backyard, that can feel the presence of Sinai on an 'ordinary' Tuesday afternoon or can make almost anywhere into a Promised Land. Not faith but *vision* is what such a religion demands; it does not call upon us to *believe* in the prophets, but rather to develop the prophetic consciousness in ourselves.

The roots of this rather radical theological formulation can be traced in *chadidism*. The masters spoke of the universe as the 'garbing' of God, of divinity as a spirit that flows through and fills all the worlds just as it transcends them. One tradition describes reality as a cosmic *aleph*, a single One composed of two letters *yod* joined by a *vav*. Think of the form of a printed *aleph*. The two *yods* are the divine mind and the human mind, two aspects of or levels of consciousness in the single One. They are both linked and separated by the *vav*, the principle of both flow and division. Another school of *chadidism* speaks of an ongoing dance of self-discovery between two aspects of the same divine self, one that 'fills' the world and the other that 'surrounds' or transcends it. Only as the human mind becomes the setting in which these eternal two discover their oneness is the purpose of human life fulfilled.

A sense of mystery and ultimate ineffability is much of what these formulations have to offer. Once the human mind opens itself to a higher state of being, it comes to realise that there are in fact infinite levels to be attained, rung beyond rung, depth within depth, without limit and without definition. A religious language that is to have any power must be evocative of this endless and mysterious reality without claiming to exhaust or even fully comprehend it.

I am suggesting that the best of mystical religious teaching can be separated from the more simplistic theism with which it has generally been associated in the Western mind. The marriage between theism and mysticism has always been a tense one, the mystic ever seeking to break down walls where the theist sought to build them up. The mystics' insights can in our day be more harmoniously wedded to a naturalistic theology, one that shares with mysticism an unwilling-

ness to make sharp separations between divine and human consciousness, between the existence of God and existence itself. The insights of mysticism will be a vital addition to natural theology, saving it from its classic pitfalls of shallowness, self-assuredness and inability to provide sufficiently rich mythic ground in which to sow the seeds of a demanding life of religious practice. Ritual without myth is empty; for the naturalist to create and appreciate myth, a sense of mystery and ultimate ineffability will have to be restored to naturalistic religion. It is this that the mystic has to offer.

But, 'in the end', you want to know, 'does this fellow believe in God?' Are his careful formulations merely evasive and, if so, what is it that he is trying to avoid saying?

The figure of God as conventionally imaged by religion is a human projection. The person on the throne, to paraphrase one surprisingly radical *chadidic* formulation, is there because we put him there. There would be no God-figure had we not created or projected it. In this sense, such a view can be called nonbelief. But we who create 'God' are also created by God, creatures of a natural world that is itself a multi-coloured garbing of divine glory. *The search for God, including the projection of our own images onto the divine, is the most ennobling of human activities*, and the reality and irreducibility of religious experience are beyond question. In this we are faithful to what seems to be the truest essence of religion throughout its history.

Here we must involve ourselves in a deep subtlety of religious language, in order that our position be quite clear. All the images through which we depict the divine, *both personal and non-personal*, are human creations. The reality toward which we are reaching through those images is entirely real. It is in fact the essence of reality itself. But its nature is so subtle, the manner of its existence so profound, that it is only by means of projected images that we can address it. In fact the words 'essence', 'nature', and 'existence' in the preceding sentences are all quite inadequate and should really be surrounded with quotation marks. The 'core' of life is, in the language of *kabbalists*, 'Nothing', a profound emptiness that paradoxically contains all of reality within it.

Only by taking a single element from within that reality and turning it into a symbol may we evoke the profundity that allows us to cast a beam of light on that great blank screen, if you will, that surrounds all of existence. 'God' is in that sense a symbol, a human creation that we need to use in order to illuminate for ourselves, however inadequately, some tiny portion of the infinite mystery. I call that mystery 'divine', not because of the objective knowledge about it, of which I am quite innocent, but because all my attempts at an encounter with it evoke in me a feeling of an awesome presence, one that can only be described in the language of religion. As I stand 'outside' my religious vocabulary, I know full well that 'God' is a human projection. But as I seek to rise to a level of consciousness beyond that of my prosaic and 'weekday' language, I know in the depths of my being that saying *adonai* in prayer, as substitute for Y-H-W-H, the mysterious and unutterable Hebrew name is as close as I can come to naming and addressing the inexpressible mystery of life.

This theological position, like every abstract theology in our history, is faced by a dual challenge: does your theology work devotionally i.e. can you *pray* to such a God? and is your theology essentially Jewish? One cannot but feel here the weight of such questions as they were to Maimonides or to Hermann Cohen. Remember Cohen's father's piercing quip: 'But where is the God of Abraham?' To both of these we can truthfully answer with a resounding 'Yes!' But both such affirmations require some explanation.

Our awareness that all images of God are human projections should not keep us from turning inward and reaching toward psychological depths that cannot be addressed without emotion. The way to God leads through our deepest and most pained emotional selves and cannot detour around them. Since our emotional lives are created and developed through encounters with other human figures, we need in some part to approach the inner work of religious transformation by confronting such an 'other' in the personhood of God. We realise that in doing this we are performing an act of personification, lending a human face to that which has none

without us. But it is only by doing so that we become comfortable addressing the divine universe as a 'Thou', becoming engaged with it to the full depth of our human subjectivity. It is chiefly God as person whom we can love, at whom we can shout in anger, with whom we can share pain. This God, especially as embodied in the father-figure of our prayer-book – and the Freudian insight is helpful here – has to be accepted, contended with and sometimes surely 'killed' in the spirit of the old Buddhist adage. But those of us who have rejoiced at the liberation we once felt in the 'death' of God, now, on the far shores of our attempts at atheism, find ourselves still contending with Him. In the process of becoming whole and becoming adult we have allowed ourselves again to love, laugh and cry with the beloved patriarch of our childhood fantasies. God may be a figment of our imagination indeed. *But our imagination, we should always remember, is itself a figment of divinity.*

The Jewishness of this theology, like that of most others we have created, lies in its language. Yes, one could use the same ideas to construct a Christianity, or perhaps even more easily a Buddhism. But it is the language, the points of reference, the scriptural roots and the ties to praxis that make a theology belong to a particular tradition. We turn to Judaism not because it is superior to all the world's religions, and certainly not because it is God's single will, *but because it is our own.* The tradition, its texts, its practices, the beloved act of study, are a spiritual home. For all the conflict in staying in that home, it has ultimately been a rich and nurturing one. *Torah*, in the broadest sense, *is the language we know best and love best. As such, it is also that which calls forth our deepest human response.* In that sense it is natural and spiritually most appropriate to remain a Jew. The Judaism to which we relate is that of the tradition in its most whole and authentic form; traditions work best when they are least diluted. This is not to say that one has to be a fully practising Jew as the orthodox would understand the term. But we do have to feel *addressed* and *challenged* by each word of the *Torah*, by each teaching of the sages. Even our rejections of practice and teaching must emerge

from honest engagement, from real struggle and confrontation. Our 'liberal' views should not serve as a cloak for cavalier desertion of our traditions. There is no serious Judaism without a serious engagement with the *mitzvot*.

What then of change? Is our age no different from ages past? Can we expect Jews in the free society, in the world after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, in a history transformed by renewed Jewish statehood, to live as though they were still in the ghetto-defined past?

Of course not. Change has come, whether we accept it or not. We do best to make peace with it. There are aspects of the religious task in this hour which are different from those we have ever faced before. We stand on the threshold of a new age in Jewish history and the Judaism appropriate to that age is only beginning to emerge. Surely it will be reshaped partly in response to the great events in our times and also in view of the great change in the Jews' role as full members of the general democratic polity. We have new responsibilities in this age and that has already brought about some reshaping of priorities. The role of observance will clearly be different in the future than it was in the past. But we must never lose sight of the fact that the deeper task of religion is one that is common to all ages and all humans. Learning awareness and building a life to be lived in constant awareness of that which transcends us and calls upon us ever to transcend, to transform, and to grow – these are demands of Y-H-W-H. As such they do not change with the times. In the divine eternal all time is One. We live in its presence as have our ancestors since the dawn of humanity, as will our descendants for as long as we see ourselves as human. The religious language we speak – and symbolic expression is part of that language – must be deeply rooted in our past, contemporary enough to excite us and fire our imagination and rich enough to carry us into a still uncharted future ■

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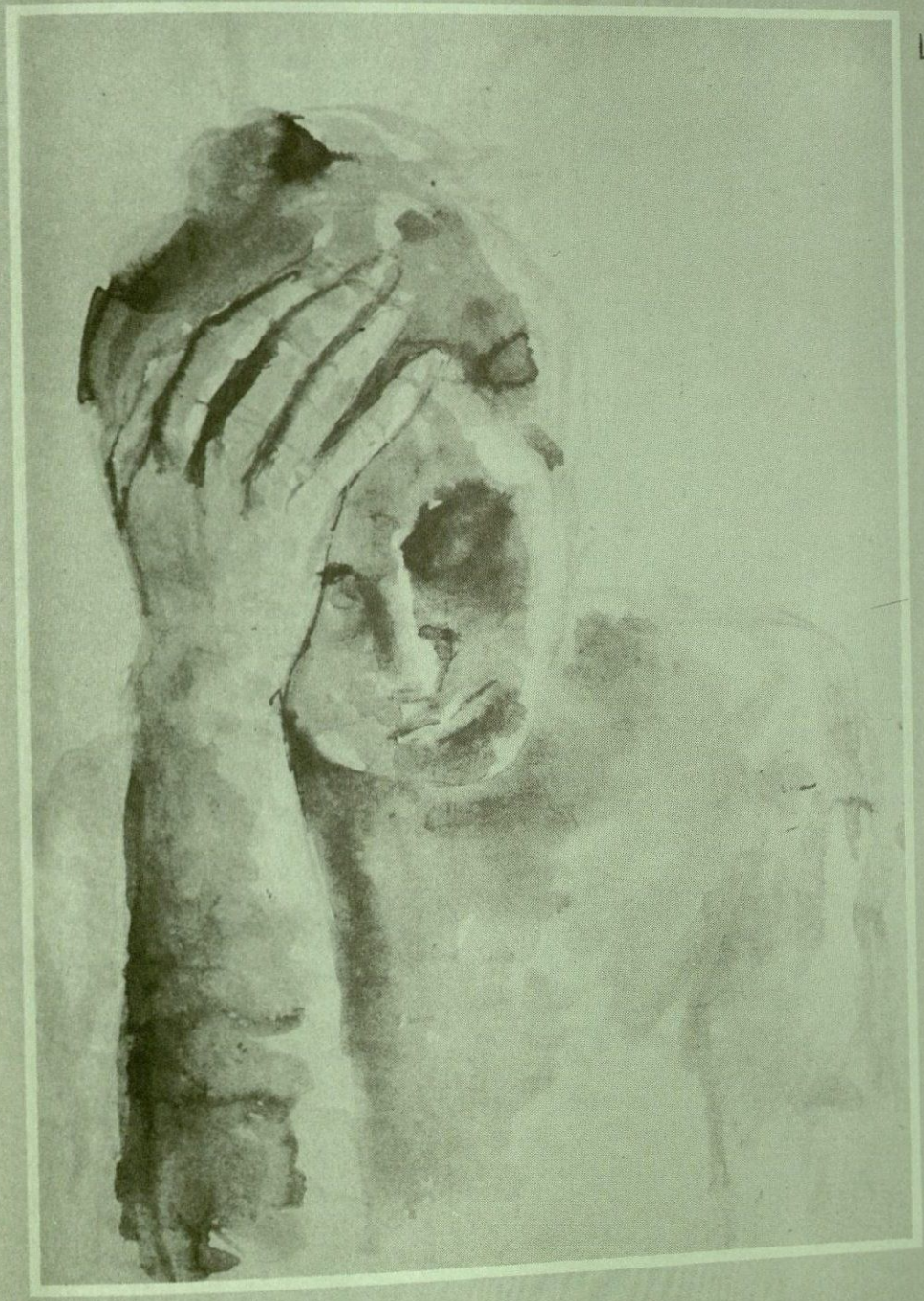
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