



RETHINKING THEOLOGY: *Language, Experience, and Reality*

Arthur Green

A Contributing Editor, Arthur Green is President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. He is the editor of the widely acclaimed two-volume work Jewish Spirituality (Crossroad Books).

One of the great tragedies of Judaism in modern times is the frequent depiction of our religion as one empty of, or even opposed to the depths of individual religious experience. Our inability to speak without embarrassment about the inward and 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 (1886-1929), who himself returned to intense Judaism from the brink of conversion, is said to have lamented that we lose some of our “best” Jews, rather than our “worst” ones, through conversion.

Reluctant Speakers of a Frozen Language

A Jewish hesitancy to speak publicly about the deeper mysteries of faith is not new. The Mishnah already warned Jews (in the second century C.E.) that certain subjects had best not be discussed in public, and that the realm of visionary experience should be taught one-on-one and to a pupil both wise and already intuitively open to such matters.¹ Jews in postbiblical times have always believed that there is a certain immodesty in 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 to have been composed by

individuals who lived long before their actual authors.² Gershom Scholem, the greatest modern scholar of Jewish mysticism, noted that Jewish literature is remarkably lacking in personal “confessions” or mystical diaries in which such experience is described directly.

At the same time, however, Judaism possessed 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 Ages³ or the teachings of the East European hasidic masters cannot but marvel at their sophisticated understanding of religious psychology and inwardness. Descriptions abound of the types of religious love, the nature of ecstasy, and the rungs of inward prayer. 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 their own profound spiritual roots. Their search was to create a Judaism that was “up-to-date” and in accord with the scientific world view, a goal that hardly leads to the study of mystical sources. In modern times, communities in Eastern Europe and the Near East—which had long served as deep reservoirs of spiritual teaching—witnessed a withering of the creative energies that are 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 become arrested during the eighteenth century. The spiritual



vocabulary was unable to release itself from old philosophical or kabbalistic terminology that no longer bore the power of conviction.

Contemporary Speech

There is no more urgent task for Judaism today 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 a deep relationship between the categories of our language and the range of our ability to experience our world. We “see” only 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. Those who have the language to talk about such matters will be better equipped to open themselves to profound religious experience.

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 rich in our classic literature. But in order for us to remain *honest*, those of us who use that language will have to maintain a dual relationship to it. We will have to be both “insiders” and “outsiders.” For we have studied religion critically and comparatively, but we also seek to rejuvenate our spiritual lives within Judaism. To understand this dual

role and its appropriateness, some basic questions of theology will have to be examined.

Theological Deliberation

We begin 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 is crucial in the human conduct of world affairs. What difference does it make in our world view, attitude, or behavior that we choose to call ourselves “religious”?

This approach takes a universal human question rather than a uniquely Jewish one as its point of departure. The great Jewish theologies have always sought to deal with universal questions. The *answers* such theologies provide are of course rooted in the Jewish tradition and speak the

Our question also presumes an article of faith: that religious experience is a distinct 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. This area of human activity can be defined broadly as “spiritual quest,” “search for God,” or “religious devotion.” Such a claim implies that people who have understood themselves in “secular” terms in the modern era have cut themselves off from an ancient and previously all-pervasive aspect of human experience. Humanity, at its most noble and profound, has sought to live in the presence of that which transcends us yet makes us most fully human.

Hasidic sources—of the early days, before Hasidism took on the role of defending tradition—

We “see” only as many gradations of “blue” as we can name; variations more subtle than our language escape our mind’s eye. So too with the life of the spirit.

very particular language of Judaism. But the *questions* are those of all humanity.

The theology that emanates from our ground-question takes as its starting point humans and the realm of personal experience, rather than God and the origins or nature of the cosmos. Our stance is “existential,” that is, it begins with the fact that *we* exist. This term is also meant in its other sense: life-and-death issues are at stake in the ground-questions of religion. Life without hope of ultimate meaning is not worth living.

bespeak a notion of *da’at* or “awareness” as a central edifying value of religious life. The early hasidic master, as in other mystical master/disciple traditions, saw himself as a teacher of spiritual wakefulness and awareness. In this he differs from both the rabbi, teacher and judge of proper daily living, and the earlier kabbalistic master, transmitter of esoteric lore.

The hasidic teacher seeks to use the tradition and its language as a resource for the cultivation of the inner life. He sees this task as the very core of religion. *Religion*



is the cultivation of an awareness that we live in relation to the transcendent, to something larger than ourselves. The religious life is a life lived in constant striving for this awareness and in response to the demands made by it. From this point of view, all the institutions, practices, beliefs, and taboos of religion are centered around that awareness.

Traditionally, every day in the life of a pious Jew is filled with the recitation of blessings. Each of these is ideally an opening of the heart to the "eternal Thou," a reaching forth to embrace the transcendent in the intimacy of familiar form. Restrictions on eating serve as an aid to viewing the dining table as a sacred altar, 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 rich variety that is highly sensitive to human need.

The Big Picture

The actual experience of transcendence is both the beginning and end of the search for awareness. Experience, even of the most undefined 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. Our search is, on one level, the attempt to make constant, or at least regular, a level of insight that has already existed in mo-

ments of spontaneous flash. In biblical language, this is called *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" (Numbers 15:40). *We are commanded to recreate by means of disciplinary regimen the awareness once given us in a moment of divine grace.* Realizing 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 we cannot recount them for anyone but ourselves. They may come in encounters with birth or

Religion is the cultivation of an awareness that we live in relation to the transcendent, to something larger than ourselves.

death, in exhilaration or in reaction to great trauma. For many, they come primarily in the context of human relations, especially in the shared love and intimacy with a single other. Some experience that special openness primarily in nature, standing in silent witness to sunrises, sunsets, stars, mountains, and water. The special qualities of changes of light in the morning and evening seem to evoke such feelings, as those who made these our daily prayer-times must have known so well.

Everyone has had such experiences, though usually we have not labeled them as "religious." Moments of awesome awareness of connection with something larger than ourselves are a vital part of what makes us human.

A Vision of God

Thus far, no claims have been made for the "existence" of God or for the objective reality of a realm that transcends 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 aware of the philosophical impossibilities of that task, we remain somewhat uncomfortable with the English word *God*. This term, rooted 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 (as the Torah and midrash suggest⁴) as an arrested form of the verb "to be," a conflate of all its tenses at once. It refers to all that was, is, and will be.

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.⁵ *It is none other than the universe, yet it bespeaks a vision of the 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 mythmaker or poet. 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 that the universe could be more whole, more beautiful, more perfect than the ordinary well-guarded mind would 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.

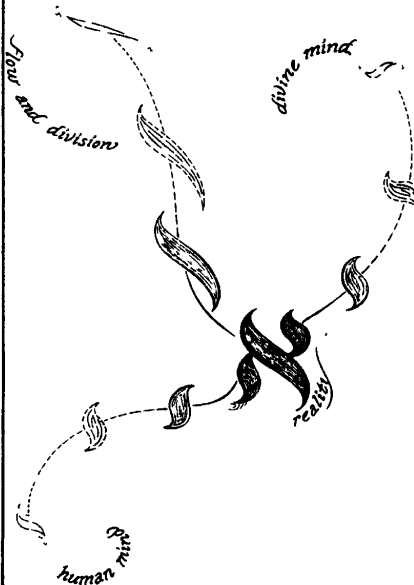
What Cannot Be Told

The roots of this rather radical theological approach can be traced in Hasidism. 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 *alef*, a single One composed of two letters *yod* joined by a *vav*. (Think of the form of a printed *alef*.) The two *yods* are the divine mind and the human mind, two aspects or levels of consciousness in the single One. They are both

linked and separated by the *vav*, the principle of both flow and division.⁶

Another school of Hasidism speaks of an ongoing dance of self-discovery between two aspects of the same divine self. One "fills" the world and the other "surrounds" or transcends it.⁷ Only as the human mind becomes the setting in which these two discover their oneness is the purpose of human life fulfilled.

A sense of mystery and pointing beyond words is what



these concepts offer. Once the human mind opens itself to a higher state of being, it comes to realize 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 power must evoke this endless and mysterious reality without claiming to exhaust or even fully comprehend it.

A Match Made in Heaven

I am suggesting that the best of

mystical religious teaching can be separated from the more simplistic theism with which it has been associated in the Western mind. The marriage between theism and mysticism has always been tense—the mystic ever seeking to break down walls that the theist built up. The mystics' insights can in our day be more harmoniously wedded to a naturalistic theology, one that shares with mysticism an unwillingness to drive a wedge between divine and human consciousness, between the existence of God and existence itself. The insights of mysticism will be a healthy partner to natural theology, saving it from its classic pitfalls of shallowness and self-assuredness, providing rich mythic ground in which to sow the seeds of a demanding life of religious practice. Ritual without myth is empty; yet to create and appreciate myth, naturalists will have to restore a sense of mystery that is beyond words to their religion. It is this that the mystic has to offer.⁸

Do I Believe in God?

But, *in the end*, you want to know, *does this fellow believe in God?* Do his careful formulations avoid the real issue, and, if so, what is it that he is trying to avoid saying?

The figure of God imaged by most religion is a human projection. The person on the throne, to paraphrase one surprisingly radical Hasidic statement, is there because we put him there.⁹ No God-figure would exist had we not created or projected it. In this sense, my view can be called nonbelief.

But we who create "God" are



also created by God. We are creatures of a natural world that is itself a multicolored 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 all religion.

Here we must involve ourselves in a deep subtlety of religious language, in order to be quite clear. All the images through which we depict the divine, *both personal and nonpersonal*, 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 *only* by means of projected images can we address it.¹⁰

The "core" of all life, in the language of kabbalists, is "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 projection 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 objective knowledge about it, of which I am quite innocent, but because all my attempts to encounter it evoke in me a feeling of an awe-

some 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 a level of consciousness beyond that of my prosaic, "weekday" language, I know in the depths of my being that saying *Adonai* in prayer (an act of submission, substituting *Adonai* 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

the inner work of religious transformation by confronting such an "other" in the personhood of God. We realize that in doing this, we are lending a human face to that which has none without us. But only by doing so can 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

All the images through which we depict the divine, both personal and impersonal, are human creations.

every abstract theology in our history, is faced by a dual challenge: Does your theology work devotionally (that is, can you *pray* to such a God?) and is your theology essentially Jewish?¹¹ To both of these we can truthfully answer with a resounding "Yes!" But both these affirmations require some explanation.

Directing the Mind in Prayer

Our awareness that all images of God are human projections should not keep us from using them. Our search requires a turning inward and a 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.¹²

Since our emotional lives are created and developed through encounters with other humans, we need in some part to approach

prayerbook (and the Freudian insight is helpful, even if troubling, 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 (a trend in religious thought twenty years ago), now, on the far shores of our attempts at atheism, find ourselves still contending with "Him." In the process of becoming whole adults, 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.*

Invigorating Jewish Lives

The Jewishness of this theology, like that of most others Jews 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, points of reference, scriptural roots, and ties to religious discipline and practice that make a theology belong to a particular tradition. We turn to Judaism not because it is the superior religion, and certainly not because it is God's single will, *but because it is our own.*

In this matter Rabbi Kaplan remains our teacher. The tradition, its texts, its practices, the beloved act of study, are our spiritual home. For all the conflict in staying in that home, it has, after all, been a rich and nurturing place. *Torah*, in the

broadest sense, *is the language we know and love best; as such, it also 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. One need not be a fully practicing 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. That means facing what strikes us as foreign, awkward, or troubling. *Our "liberal" views should not serve as a cloak for cavalier desertion or disdain of our traditions.* Serious Judaism means serious engagement with *mitzvot*.

What then of change? Is our age no different than those 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 if we make peace with it. Aspects of the religious task of this hour differ from those we have faced before. We stand on the threshold of a new age in Jewish history, and the proper Judaism for that age is only beginning to emerge. It will be reshaped partly in response to the great events of our times and also in view of the great change in 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 differ in the future. But we must never lose sight of the fact that the deeper task of religion is common to all ages and to all humans. Building a life to be lived in constant awareness of that which transcends us and calls upon us ever to transcend, transform, and grow—these are demands of Y-H-W-H. 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 humankind, as will our descendants for as long as we see ourselves as human. The religious language we speak—including the symbols we use—must be deeply rooted in our past, contemporary enough to excite us and fire our imagination, and rich enough to carry us into the uncharted future. ■

NOTES

1. *Hagigah* 2:1.
2. The *Zohar* is one example. Written at the end of the thirteenth century, it presents itself as the work of a rabbi who lived some 1100 years earlier.
3. Such works as *Reshit Hokhmah* by Elijah de Vidas of Safed (partially translated by Lawrence Fine in *Safed Spirituality* [New York: Paulist Press, 1984]), or *Mesilat Yesharim* by Moses Hayyim Luzzatto (translated by Mordecai M. Kaplan).
4. Exodus 3:13-15, *Exodus Rabbah* 3:6.
5. This phrasing is adapted from the "Prayer of Elijah," part of the introduction to *Tikunei Zohar*, and recited daily by Sephardic Jews.
6. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, *Me'or Einayim*. Available in English in my translation of his *Upright Practices: The Light of the Eyes* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), pp. 80ff.
7. This is the language of *HaBaD* thought. For a thorough treatment, see "HaBaD: The Contemplative Ascent to

(completed on page 30)



lead in an international effort to rescue Jews. The government simply did not wish to take that responsibility. By contrast, the American Jewish community wanted to take the responsibility but could not. As painful and maddening as it is to read of the organizational jealousy and ideological factionalism of American Jewry, the historian cannot ascribe more responsibility or blame to that community than it deserved.

Holocaust Education is a collection of fifteen short essays on a variety of subjects related to the Holocaust. It is a report of the Eighth Annual Philadelphia Conference on Teaching

the Holocaust. The essays are written as reports—few would qualify as bona fide articles. A few teach something new, some are richly suggestive and speculative, others recap what is already known and what has already been thought.

Three essays together convey the range of the topics addressed. In an essay on German Jewish social history, Professor Deborah Hertz of SUNY-Binghamton questions the assumption that German Jews tried to become more German than the Germans themselves. She concludes that Jews sought a middle ground—to remain Jewish and to assimilate

German culture as their own. In an essay written in *Commentary* in 1984, Jacob Katz made the same basic point. Jews accepted German culture as their own, but generally did not intermarry or mix socially with Germans. Hertz concludes that to put down the German Jews' attempt to find the middle ground is to "rob them of their glory and of their optimism that things might have turned out very differently indeed."

Richard Rubenstein

Richard Rubenstein contributes a highly speculative essay on the relationship between genocide and demography. Genocide, he claims, has become a social policy to solve a host of modern problems, especially overpopulation and underemployment. Modern technology creates a "population redundancy"—a large pool of people whom the state cannot or will not support. The state then resorts to population transfer or genocide.

It is difficult to accept Professor Rubenstein's conclusions. In his recent book on twentieth-century refugees, Michael Marrus sees the Jewish emigration of the early twentieth century as part of the huge *general* emigration taking place in the same period. Neither the pauperization of large sectors of society nor the ensuing emigration was a conscious goal of the state. The pogroms that were major causes of Jewish emigration were not the result of the technological revolution.

In another essay, Dean J. Willard O'Brien laments the fact that law schools ignore the source of law—God—as the origin of obligation. Consequently, law students are not instructed in morality. "What we end up with is frightening," O'Brien writes. "A secular society, law training primarily as a secular enterprise, and lawyers as people whose work requires them sometimes to be immoral and at best amoral. This is what the law—man's law—com-

Orthodoxy

(continued from page 17)

based on B.T. *Sanhedrin* 20b.

11. His article was titled, "The Genocide Commandment in the Torah," *Bat Kol*, 26 Feb. 1980, reported by Amnon Rubenstein (see note 3). His is by no means a lone voice.

12. Extreme Orthodox Jewish circles understood the halakhic troubles Jewish statehood would create, and they fiercely opposed Zionism.

13. The liturgy of *Havdalah*, for instance, implies that Jews differ from Gentiles by nature, in their essence—as between day and night, sacred and profane.

14. Recently this classic ruling was invoked when members of the Jewish terrorist underground were brought to justice. According also to Rabbi Shakh, leader of the Lithuanian yeshivot (Torah

academies) in Israel and mentor of the "Shas" party, Jews may take the law into their own hands and without ado kill a non-Jew who breaks any of the Seven Precepts of the Children of Noah (in his book *Avi Ezer*, reported in *Ha'aretz*, 1 July 1987).

15. One should also beware of facile readings of the Bible. For instance the humanity of Judaism has been advanced by liberal Jews who brandish sayings such as "Love your friend as yourself!" Orthodox rabbis rebut their reading with ease; they claim that the term "friend" meant a *Jewish* friend. They may well be right.

16. I do not call for mere reform to suit today's world—a better fit with present-day fashions. Who says that these fashions are good? Why should Judaism, at whose center is the idea of God rather than humankind, not make painful demands?

Rethinking Theology

(continued from page 13)

God," by Rachel Elior, in my *Jewish Spirituality II* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), pp. 157ff.

8. The reader interested in pursuing further the radical theological implications of Hasidic thought might want to read my essays, "Hasidism: Discovery and Retreat" in Peter Berger's *The Other Side of God* (New York: Anchor, 1981), pp. 104ff., and "Hasidism" in A. Cohen and P. Mendes-Flohr, *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought* (New York: Scribner's, 1987), pp. 317ff.

9. Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apt,

quoted in *Ateret Tzevi, aharei mot*.

10. In fact, the words "essence," "nature," and "existence" in the preceding sentences are all quite inadequate, and should really be surrounded with quotation marks.

11. One cannot but feel here the weight of such questions as they were put to the medieval philosopher Maimonides, or to Hermann Cohen, the great German Jewish philosopher of the beginning of this century. Remember the piercing question put to Cohen: "But where is the *Bore Olam*—the Creator?"

12. On this point, I am clearly a "Bratslaver" and not a "HaBaDnik." On the distinction, see my *Tormented Master* (University of Alabama Press, 1979).