

At its last Convention, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association held a round table discussion on theodicy. The participants included Arthur Green, the President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College; Judith Plaskow, Professor of Theology at Manhattanville College, and Harvey Cox, Professor of Religion at the Harvard Divinity School. The moderator was Nancy Fuchs-Kraemer, Director of the Religious Studies Program at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. An adapted version of their remarks follows.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

A Conversation

KREIMER: F. Scott Fitzgerald said that in the dark night of the soul it is always three in the morning. A rabbi I know tells a story about a phone call he received one rainy morning at three in the morning, telling him that one of his congregants was at a hospital. Her son, a thirty-year-old man with three children, had just been killed in a car crash. The rabbi jumped into the car and as he drove the long way to the hospital, he kept asking himself, "What am I going to say; how am I going to deal with this situation?" When he arrived in the hospital there were already some friends and doctors and various people gathered around the woman. She emerged from this small crowd, embraced him, and said "How can people not believe in God? Tonight for the first time I finally got it. Now I understand what you were saying in your sermons all those years—in the love and the caring and the support I'm getting tonight. Now I really believe in God." The rabbi, in his modest way as he tells the story, says "I'd better retire right now, it's never going to get any better than this."

Of course, he didn't retire right then, but I think that what that story says to me is that we are going to grapple with two issues in this discussion and the second is really more important than the first. The first issue relates to those late night rides to the hospital; the second relates to the teachings all along the way in the many, many years before those moments, which someday have to come together for people, which people have to somehow get at crucial moments in their lives and in our lives.

GREEN: I want to start with a word on the truth of theology. I want theology to be a rich and honest description of reality as I and we have known it. Does that description correspond to reality as it is beyond the subjective as some correspondence that goes from our subjective experience of reality to what the world really is? I guess I would have to say yes, in so far as I and we are not crazy. Since I believe that the presence of the

Divine is everywhere and that one side of that Divinity is evolving and is present in all things, evolving in all things, it is carried into the human being in the patterns that make us universally human in our genetic structure. I believe that the memory of all that has ever existed is somehow there in us. Since ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny in the biology of the individual, I believe it somehow does in the mind structure of the individual too, in what makes for consciousness. That which we discover by turning within, most within, has some correspondence to that which universally is, to that which exists in other people, and that which exists throughout reality.

On that level, if religion is our construction of reality by what we create by an inward journey, it does correspond to some sort of truth in some deep structural way, but not in specific description, because religion has also given us the language and the tools and the freedom to recast that reality, to tell its story in a new way, to tell its story as a story of faith. As we tell our stories—you tell me the Jesus story, I tell you the Sinai story or whatever the stories are—we somehow set truth to music. But what do we mean when we talk about religion setting the story or setting truth to music and trying to give it a different tone, a different lift by the way it is set to music?⁴ We talk about music as a universal language, but is there a universal music? Or are there many varieties of music? Are there underlying rhythms and patterns and tonal qualities that make all music one? Can you, as a lover of Bach, also appreciate a certain sameness about African drumming or about Tibetan chanting? Or is each of those culturally conditioned and somehow separate? Can I, while loving my own music, while knowing that I am a Bach lover or a Mozart lover and I am really not going to be a lover of Indian ragas, can I at the same time find a universal music, a universal language, that underlies them all and somehow recognize as manifest in other music, in its otherness without trying to declare it mine?

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The Theodicy of Rabbi Nahman

In theodicy more than anywhere else, I see myself as a disciple of Nahman of Bratslav. That was what was most attractive to him about me—his theodicy. I found him the only Jewish thinker before Martin Buber who took the absence or eclipse of God as a serious reality. Nahman talks about three levels of truth, or three levels of reality. There is a naïve level of faith on which he says we all believe in God: we believe in Providence and then we have to go beyond that. For me that's not even a naïve level of faith. But the naïve level of faith for me is something like "the whole earth that is filled with God's glory." There is a level, an immediacy of faith, which opens up and sees the presence of God in the world. Nahman says you look at that faith, at that perception of Divine reality carefully, and it begins to fall apart, it begins to crumble. You look for evidence of it and there is no evidence. You try to prove it to yourself and you can't prove it. Then you begin to confront what he calls the void, the empty space, the place where there is no God. He says there is a level where every human being will experience it someplace, where God is truly absent, where there is no God. That is a reality as well. That absence of God has to exist if we are to be human. We become human, we grow, we stretch, only in that absence of God. If the Divine Presence were there all the time, if we lived in a world in which we could truly always say "the whole earth is filled with God's glory" we wouldn't be stretching and reaching and growing and becoming what we need to become as human beings.

Paradoxically, our humanity somehow thrives on the absence of God. At the same time, there is a truth of truths, a deeper level of reality, where we know that even in the void the Divine is to be found. That is a secret we cannot let out too easily because it becomes cheap. We have to find a way to say it that doesn't try to

negate the void, doesn't try to deny the void; doesn't try to apologize for the absence of God. Is it just defiance? Sometimes it's just defiance. Sometimes it's just saying: "even though the void is real, I still have faith," but I think it's more than that. I think it represents sort of "moments of knowing." We have moments of knowing in our lives that there is some deeper truth. We have moments of knowing in our lives that it all does fit together, that life does have meaning. Those are rare moments and we try to cultivate them in ourselves. We try to build a life around those moments. A very

important part of what religion is about for me is finding those moments that are in our collective religious language, but also in our individual lives—the crossing of the seas, the standing before, the standing in the presence, and trying to make those moments real. Religion for me becomes a kind of spiral—"the faith has to include the doubt, and the doubt has to include the faith"—but each time you make another move of faith incorporating doubt and affirmation incorporating denial, you somehow go another rung higher or another rung deeper, so that there is an ascending or internalizing spiral of faith and doubt and doubt and faith.

What Nahman is doing is playing Job to the Baal Shem Tov's Deuteronomy. Jewish theology begins with Deuteronomy. We are told to love the Lord God and wine, corn, oil, and all good things will come. The author of Job comes along and says: "It's not true. I tried it, it doesn't work." You have to build theologically from there. Nahman's great-grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov, offers a new Deuteronomy—not reward and punishment, but tune in, turn on, open your eyes, and discover that all things are filled with the Divine Presence, that God is everywhere; the

palpable presence of Divinity fills the universe. Nahman says "I tried and it doesn't work; I tried and I found emptiness. Now what do I do?" So it's in a different key, if you will, that same relationship that Job has to Deuteronomy.

A Balancing Act

I sometimes feel myself living there with regard to the New Age theologies of our time, and again, that affirmation and denial wants to be there. I think that

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we Jews, as a theological voice, have to keep faith with the Holocaust in this generation and have to say the absence of God is real and it is total and absolute, and it is not something we are going to deny for a moment. At the same time, we have known moments, and even people there knew moments, and there is some ability to go beyond. But that ability to go beyond always has to be tempered with not letting go of the reality of the absence of God. On an individual level, in working with people, that means recognizing people's pain, and recognizing the event when people feel in pain, and the absence people feel in pain. It means not only recognizing it as real, but accepting it, accepting it as truth and identifying with it. Yes, you understand that abandonment is real, that the absence of God in that person's life is a reality that a person experiences and that reality is not just that person's illusion or that person's inability to see, but that it is reality. At the same time we are there, as rabbis, when the time is right and when it is not insensitive to do so, to remind and call forth some deeper truth in that person as well. "But you know the moment when, but you know the truth also of..."—whatever that person's moment was or whatever our religious language offers as a way of doing that.

One of the things we have to do is make our religious language work better, and here I think is one of the tasks that lies before us at which we have not been very good. That is, taking the religious language of Exodus, or of the splitting of the sea, or of standing at Sinai, or of Abraham and Sarah, or of Jacob wrestling with the Angel or whatever the moment is, and making that a religious language that works in helping people talk both about their own inner struggles and denials, but also about their own inner moments of transcendence. We have a very rich legacy of stories, but creating a connection between the telling of our collective stories and allowing people to use those things to tell their personal stories is something we haven't done well enough yet. But I would say that is the theology for which I look. One that allows for the reality of absence, the reality of denial and at the same time tries to incorporate a doubt into a deeper affirmation of faith.

PLASKOW: The problem of evil is the problem that brought me into theology. When I was twelve, I began reading voraciously about the Holocaust and the Holocaust became for me and remains for me, the paradigm of evil. As an English major in college, I was drawn to Conrad, and thought about writing a thesis

about the problem of evil in literature. When I was a graduate student, I wrote three of my four doctoral exams on the problem of evil. I wrestled with the problem of evil precisely in its classical formulation. Was it possible to affirm that God is both good and omnipotent, given the existence of evil in the world? As J. B. says in the play by that name, "If God is God he is not good, if God is good He is not God, take the even, take the odd."

For all my reading, I never found a theodicy that worked for me. I've always found the "free will defense" powerful in explaining the origins of moral evil, but it does nothing to explain the victims of evil, and for the same reason, it is useless to explain physical evil. It always seemed to me that, to solve the problem of evil, it was necessary to surrender a belief either in God's power or God's goodness. While intellectually, I would far prefer to give up God's power, to say that God has gone into exile and that God weeps for the exile of God's people, emotionally it has always been God's power that is much more real to me than God's goodness. To say that God has no connection with evil is to deny the real power of evil in the world or to deny the oneness of God.

One of the things that I have always most deeply valued about Judaism is its refusal to disconnect God from evil. There is a midrash that pictures Moses as he watches Akiba being flayed alive. Moses turns to God and says, "This is the man and this is his reward?" and God replies "Be silent. Such is my will," for all its dreadful and painfulness, the story has always seemed to me profoundly honest in its refusal to disconnect God from such horror. Similarly, Elie Wiesel's story with which he ends *The Gates of the Forest*—the story of a group of Jews in Auschwitz putting God on trial for the Holocaust and finding God guilty—spoke for a long time to my understanding of God and God's relationship to evil. As I was thinking about this presentation, I went back to my bookshelf and took Camus' *The Plague* from my shelf, and found my favorite line. Dr. Rieux says: "Since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refused to believe in Him, and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence."

The pastoral implications of this understanding of God are not thrilling. It legitimizes anger at God, which I think is very important, and it does affirm that anger is a form of connection—a form of connection that, as the Book of Job tells us, that God countenances

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and even rewards. At the same time, to see God in this way means seeing oneself as a victim, as God's victim.

Rethinking Evil, Rethinking God

Given the power of the problem of evil for me, I was very startled when I finished my book *Standing Again At Sinai* and realized that I hadn't dealt with it. I didn't plan on not dealing with it. I wasn't avoiding it. On one level I see my whole book as about evil—the evil of patriarchy. It is about how human beings destroy each other and ourselves when we set up patterns of hierarchical relationships. But at the same time, the position of evil is presented in the book, the issue of structural sin had in some way replaced theodicy for me. I no longer see God as in any way responsible for the structural injustice and evil that human beings create. We create these structures and we have to dismantle them. I realized that the conception of God that generates theodicy is no longer salient for me. It is not only that I no longer feel I have to choose between God's goodness and omnipotence; I don't believe in a God who acts in history.

I first realized that I was moving away from this conception of God when my mother died twelve years ago. My mother died of a brain tumor at age fifty-eight, providing me with an excellent opportunity to be angry at God. But I wasn't angry at God; I was angry at the Reform liturgy, and its images of justice and judgement that are absolutely central to the funeral service. I didn't want to hear that God was just. I wanted to hear about cycles. I wanted to hear that people are born and die, that God gives and takes away, that the moon waxes and wanes, that tides move in and out, that nothing really dies, that everything is taken up in our memory and in the ecology of the planet. I didn't believe in a God who causes Holocausts or brain tumors, but I do believe in a God that we meet with and struggle with in history as we attempt to make sense of the good and evil in our lives.

This new understanding is very much rooted in and still connected with my earlier one, but it has also been transformed by my feminist experience and what I have learned from Native American religion. For me, the choice between giving up God's power or giving up God's goodness has dissolved into a series of images that are not captured any longer by this choice. I have learned from Goddess feminists, for example, that God is the life and death and rebirth energy in the universe. I have learned from Native American religion that life

depends on death, that all things, plants, animals, and human beings must sacrifice themselves so that others may live. I have become much more aware of the ambiguity of life energy. Human creativity seems to me more and more like atomic power, with a tremendous capacity for good or for evil. This isn't anybody's fault; it is the nature of life and the source of our freedom.

The feminist theologian Nel Morton describes a shift in gestalt that she experienced on a plane trip. She had been afraid to fly and when the plane hit some turbulence and began to bounce up and down, she found herself appealing to the God she had believed in when she was five years old. She prayed to the "daddy in the sky" to bring the plane down safely. The she said to herself, "Get a grip on yourself, you're a feminist theologian, your not supposed to be doing this. Pray to the Goddess." She took some deep breaths, sat back, and tried to pray and she found that her whole approach had changed. She wasn't praying to the Goddess to hold the plane in her hand and make it come down safely. Rather, she began to experience the Goddess in the clouds and in the turbulence, and she was able to experience the rhythm of riding the air rather than being terrified by it. For me, too, in large measure, God has shifted from a God above us in the sky to the sustaining

ground, that is not disconnected from evil, but is also not at fault for it and sustains us in the struggle against it.

I see God not just as the energy of the physical universe, but also of the human community, the sustaining and containing ground of community. I see God as the ultimate horizon of community and that the differences that we struggle with and against as human beings are all held together in the reality of God. This fits for me with another image of Nel Morton, an image of God as the great ear at the heart of the universe that hears us into speech, that hears us to a place where we can hear each other. Catherine Keller, building on Nel Morton, talks about God as the "infinite force-field of feeling consciousness, which can only appeal to us through the depths of our own interpretative system."

As I was reading *The Book of J*, it struck me that in a funny way this understanding of God has a lot of affinities with J's Yahweh as Bloom describes him, insofar as vitalism and uncanniness are Yahweh's central characteristics. Yahweh wipes out the earth and destroys Sodom and Gomorrah but also supports and is the ground of Abraham's protest against this destruction. I don't have any problem with this

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personification so long as we see it as personification. On the contrary, it seems to me to fit with Moses' injunction, which is still very central for me in my understanding of evil: "I have set before you life and good, death and evil; therefore choose life." To my mind, this injunction captures the central paradox of both the tradition's view of evil and my own understanding of it: that the same God who destroys, also supports our protest against that destruction. The same God who sets out life and death tells us to choose.

Now, this is profoundly perverse. If you're going to create life and death, why say "Choose life"? If you're going to say "Choose life," why create both? Yet we can't surrender either side of the paradox. From a pastoral perspective I think this means many different things. It means, first of all, that we are not God's victims, that we're placed in an enormously complex and vital universe, which, like the vitality of God, expresses itself in different directions. It is up to us not as individuals, but as members of communities, to create meaningful frameworks for understanding and living with this complexity. Sometimes

when our frameworks of meanings are threatened, God sustains us through the anger and the loss and the despair, and grounds our efforts to bring meaning or growth out of terrible experiences. Sometimes God is present in the struggle against the multiple injustices that deform our world, and is a source of vision as we struggle against injustice. Sometimes it may be better for God if we refuse to believe in God, a decision that I think is also rooted in and supported by an aspect of God's reality.

COX: These were both very, very telling and eloquent statements. I do want to say that I think I've just been converted into a goddess worshipper, at least in part, by Judith Plaskow's reference to Nel Morton's experience. When I fly home today, I really want to feel that air, that turbulence, but I also have a smidgen of patriarchy left, and I want it to land safely in Boston. So maybe I'm affirming here a kind of inclusive-gender deity. When I was only about sixteen years old, the minister in the small town where I was growing up left for his August vacation. Since he knew that I was hoping to be a minister some day, he asked me if I would take over for the month, assuring me that nothing would happen, ours being a small, quiet town. Sure enough, ten days after he left, there was a terrible accident in the town and one of the most popular teachers in the grade school

was killed, and it fell upon me to preside at the burial service. I had never even been to a burial service or a funeral, and here I was, with everyone counting on me. Luckily I was helped in that responsibility by the local funeral director, who, however, turned out to be an Episcopalian. This was a Baptist church, and he lent me the *Book of Common Prayer*. I opened it to the place where the burial service is, and I read it beforehand so I would know all the words. I stood next to the grave as the body was lowered with many of the townspeople

standing around and read this service. As I read it, I thought the language was strange, there were some concepts in it I didn't believe, there was something peculiar about standing by this grave. But the more I read it and the more the people listened, and the more the nature of the occasion bore in on me, even as a very young kid, the more I knew I was doing the exactly the right thing. I was invoking something that had gone before her, had gone before us, would be there after we were gone—something that wasn't literal or propositional, something that was more like poetry, more like an anguished *elegia plea* in a meaningless and

unacceptable situation. It taught me something about ritual and language that has always stayed with me.

Striking Out Omnipotence

I have struggled, as all of us have, with the dilemma that Judith Plaskow put very well: that of the classical form of goodness and power of God and how innocent suffering can possibly be accommodated to this view of God. I simply have to say that I have given up on the omnipotence. Now, I think Plaskow just made a very strong case that there is something a little "weasely" about that, and I accept that. I think we have to work out—at least I have to work out—an understanding of God that does not expect God to be or symbolize God as being Almighty. I would like to strike out those words if I could from at least my personal theology. Surely, in the bombings of Baghdad and the SCUD attacks on Tel Aviv, God, if we have any understanding of God, was on the receiving side of those bombs and missiles and not on the manufacturing and sending side. Surely, God is the one who suffers along with those who suffer, especially those who suffer innocently without any cause. In fact, I have been troubled, and partially persuaded, by some of the feminist suggestions that the whole idea of omnipotence is a kind of a male power-fantasy that makes God into something we would like to

be so that we can be angry. But we are not that and God is. We have something to fight against and there is something a little infantile about that, something that hasn't quite reached the level of maturity in which there is no one to blame anymore for the things that go wrong with us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote very eloquently about this as he sat in the Gestapo prison cell in 1944, said that we simply have to live without the *deus ex machina* anymore. God does not rescue us from the situations we have created and we have to live in the world as though God did not exist, at least as far as these kinds of issues are concerned.

Causing Pain

Now, I want to pose an issue that isn't normally discussed when speaking of suffering and evil. As I think about my own life, which has been a relatively happy one, my sharpest experiences of pain and suffering have been the hurt that I have caused other people. I can honestly say that. I once had to break an engagement as a young man because I really wasn't ready. I was afraid to marry the young woman to whom I was engaged. I loved her very much but I did not want to marry her and breaking the engagement was shattering her world. I continued to know her and to see her after the engagement was broken, and I knew how much pain and how much utter destruction I had caused, and yet I knew I couldn't do anything about it. I was powerless to enter into that relationship again. I went through a divorce about ten years ago and kept feeling throughout that I had caused pain, that I had caused someone to suffer, someone who was at least as relatively innocent as I was, and perhaps more so. How do we deal with the pain that we have caused other people? This is a different kind of issue and perhaps,

understandably, not one that Jewish thinkers and theologians have dealt with, since we live in the century in which the most massive, destructive, and intolerably unprecedented pain and suffering was committed against the Jewish people. Nonetheless, I think we all have this experience personally at some point, of causing pain to the other. How do we deal with that?

Rather than seeing either goodness or power as the essential quality of what we call God, I would like to call it the hunger for relationality. God is hungering for our love of God, just as we are hungering and yearning for the love of others and for God's love. The essential quality of love, perhaps even the image of God that is stamped on us at our creation, is this need for relationality, this desperate need. What if we went back and thought about the Creation story again, not as some omnipotent deity creating the world and the universe out of nothing, but as God expressing God's need for something else, someone else, another to love and to be loved by, and saw our creation as a shaping and a being shaped story, rather than as an act of *ex nihilo* creation. This also helps with people who say they don't need God. The step beyond Nahman of Bratslav is that people do not even anguish about the absence of God anymore. First there was the wonderful presence of God, if you only looked around. Then there was "Well I'm looking around and there doesn't seem to be any God" and anguishing about it. Now, for all the people we know, or at least many of them, atheism or the absence of God is simply something with which they are quite comfortable. But there is something that they are not comfortable with, and that which they are not comfortable with is this hungering for relationship, for friendship, for love, for community, which has to be for us today the code in which we can reintroduce perhaps the language about God. ■

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