

CHAPTER 1

**WHAT IS JEWISH THEOLOGY?**

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The following remarks are offered from a particular theological point of view. I do not present them as an objective description of a historical phenomenon called Jewish Theology. They are, if you will, a theologian's rather than a historian's definition. I see myself as a theologian in the tradition of an Eastern European school of Jewish mystical theology, itself the heir of the Kabbalistic and Hasidic traditions. The chief figures in this school (here identified as such for the first time) in the twentieth century were Judah Loeb Alter of Ger, author of the *Sefat Emet*, Abraham Isaac Kook, Chief Rabbi of the Holy Land, Hillel Zeitlin, teacher and martyr of the Warsaw ghetto, and my own teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel.

This school is defined by a sense that the starting point of theological reflection is the cultivation of inwardness and the opening of the soul to God's presence throughout the world. The members of this group may all be characterized as experientialist mystics. Each of them celebrates inward religious experience, their own as well as that provided by literary or historic example, as the primary datum with which the theologian has to work. Each in one way or another also points toward an ultimately unitive view of religious truth. They are all engaged in a search for Jewish expression of transcendent oneness, such as might "broaden the bounds of the holy" to overcome even such seemingly ultimate distinctions as those between the holy and the profane or between the divine and human realms.

This group of thinkers also has some other key elements in common. All are awed by the constantly renewing presence of God within the natural world; they may in this sense be said to share a "Creation-centered" theological perspective. Their perspective is deeply immanentist: God is to be

known by seeing existence through its "innermost point" or by addressing the questions of "depth theology." A certain crucial veil needs to be lifted in order to enable the mind to achieve a more profound (and essentially intuitive) view of reality. Their religion is in this sense universalistic, relating in the first instance to a divine reality that is not limited to the particular Jewish setting. Within the group there is an evolution to be traced on this question, from the *Sefat Emet*, still living within the Hasidic/mythical universe which sees only the Jewish soul as potentially aware of divinity, to the much greater universalism of a Heschel, a full respecter of the spiritual legitimacy of non-Jewish religious life.

These Eastern European spiritual teachers are all thoroughly comfortable with their Judaism, a garment that is completely natural to them. None of them is primarily a "defender" of the tradition, nor is any of them interested in proving his own orthodoxy to others. They all see *halakhah* as a natural part of the way Jews live, but they do not turn primarily to halakhic texts as their source of spiritual nurturance. In this way they are to be distinguished from another group of Eastern European religious figures, the pan-halakhists or the Lithuanian school, who proclaim *halakhah* itself to be the only authentic expression of Judaism.

I begin my remarks with this excursus on spiritual lineage because I want to make it clear that I see theology as a significant undertaking only in a devotionalist context, i.e., a context where prayer (in the broadest sense), a cultivation of interiority, and awareness of divine presence are given primacy. As this may be considered a somewhat odd or off-beat position among contemporary Jews, I begin by emphasizing its historic roots. In a broader sense, the views I articulate may be called neo-Hasidic. I believe that post-modern Jews' recovery of the Kabbalistic/Hasidic tradition is a decisive event in our ongoing spiritual history, one that should have a great impact upon the future of Jewish theology.

Bearing this legacy in mind, I shall attempt that which the tradition in its wisdom so thoroughly avoids: a definition of Jewish theology and its task. *Each Jewish theology is a religious attempt to help the Jewish people understand the meaning of human life and Jewish existence out of the store of texts, symbols, and historical experience that are the shared inheritance of all Jews.*

This definition seeks to emphasize several key points. It begins by understanding theology as a "religious" undertaking. This point is far from obvious, especially in a world where theology too often dresses itself in academic garb and seeks a borrowed legitimacy from philosophy or social science. By "religious" in this context I mean to say that theology emerges from living participation in the life of the faith-community. It seeks to give expression to the essentially ineffable experience of divinity and to articulate a series of beliefs around the relationships of God, world, and person.

In order to do this, theology must have recourse to language. Herein lies the first of many tensions that characterize the theological enterprise. The mystic knows God mostly in silence. Surely the deep well of inner awareness in which God is to be found reaches far beyond the grasp of words or concepts. Both personal experience and Kabbalistic tradition confirm this. Knowing full well the inadequacy of words and the mental constructs they embody, the theologian has no choice but to become articulate. In this we are heirs to both the prophet and the mystical teacher who rail against their inability to refrain from speaking.

Our speech is saved from utter inadequacy by our tradition of sacred speech. God speaks the world into being, according to our Torah, an act that is repeated each day, or perhaps even each moment, in the ongoing renewal of creation. We know that such divine speech is not in our human language, nor is this cosmic speech-act anything quite like our own. Nevertheless, the claim that we worship a God of words is of value as we seek to use language to speak about the sacred. Our prayerbook introduces each day's verbal worship by blessing God "who spoke and the world came to be." Prayer is the bridge between the abstract notion of divine language and the use of human words to speak of God. Let us say it in the language of grammar: the divine first person use of speech—God's own "I am"—is usually inaccessible to us, except in rare moments. Our third person voice in theologizing—"God is"—rings hollow and inadequate. These are brought closer by our willingness to use speech in the second person—the saying of "You" in prayer, our response to the divine "you" addressed to us—which redeems speech for us and brings the divine into the world of language.

This clearly means that theology is dependent upon prayer. Prayer is a primary religious activity, a moment of opening the heart either to be filled with God's presence or to cry out at divine absence. Theology comes later, the mind's attempt to articulate and understand something that the heart already knows. In defining theology as a "religious" activity, I mean to say that it grows out of a rich and textured life of prayer. The theologian's prayer-life, which may be as filled with questioning, doubt, and challenge as it is with submission and praise, is the essential nurturer of religious thinking.

In Jewish terms, theologizing is part of the *mitsvah* of knowing God, listed by Maimonides as first among the commandments. Knowledge of God is the basis of both worship and ethics, according to many of the Jewish sages. The term *da'at* or knowledge bears within it a particularly rich legacy of meaning. It is best translated "awareness," the intimate and consciousness-transforming knowledge that all of being, including the human soul, is infused with the presence of the One. This *da'at*, sometimes compared in the sources to the knowledge with which Adam "knew" his wife Eve, is far more than credence to a set of intellectual propositions. It is a knowing whose roots extend back into the Tree of Life, not just to the Tree of Knowledge.

But the language the Jewish theologian speaks is not one of words alone. The traditions of Israel are filled with speech-acts of a trans-verb sort. These are epitomized by the sounding of the *shofar*, described by some sources as a wordless cry that reaches to those places (in the heavens? within the self? in the Self?) where words cannot penetrate. The same may be said of all the sacred and mysterious silent acts of worship: the binding of *tefillin*, the waving of the *lulav*, the eating of *matzot*. All of these belong to the silent heart of the Jewish theological vocabulary.

In defining Jewish theology as an "attempt to help the Jewish people," I mean to say that the theologian has an active and committed relationship to the community. A Jewish theologian is a theologian who works with the Jewish people, not just with the symbolic vocabulary of the Jewish tradition. There is no Judaism without Jews, and that is no mere tautology. To be a Jewish theologian, especially in an age when the very future of our existence is threatened, is to accept the value of Jewish continuity and to direct one's efforts toward the building of a Jewish future. This does not mean that

theology is to become the handmaiden of survivalism, or that particular theological ideas are to be judged on their value for Jewish survival. But it does mean that the theologian speaks out of the midst of a living community, and addresses him or herself in the primary sense to that community of Jews. If there are other masters to be served, as there always are (I think of such masters as pluralism, consistency, scholarly objectivity, and so forth), let us remember that the Jewish people should come near the head of the line.

Here again I need refer to the particular tradition out of which I speak. In this tradition, Jewish theology has passed only in the last two generations from the hands of *rebbe*s to those of their less-defined modern successors. The legacy of the Hasidic master is not yet forgotten here. He may be characterized as a latter-day descendent of the Platonic philosopher/king. Drawn by his own inclination to dwell exclusively in the upper realms of mystical devotion, he is forced by communal responsibilities to dwell "below," amid his people, and concern himself with their welfare. Cleaving fast to both realms at once, he thus becomes a pole or channel between heaven and earth. While the contemporary theologian should stay far from the pretense and pomposity that often result from such exaggerated claims of self-importance, he or she would do well to imitate the grave sense of communal as well as spiritual responsibility, and the link between these two, that went with the mantle of those who "said Torah."

Jewish theology seeks to understand "the meaning of human life and Jewish existence." The questions faced by theology are universal. It exists in order to address itself to the essential human quest for meaning; while nurtured from the wellsprings of tradition, it grows most vigorously in the soil of personal religious quest. It wants to address itself to issues of life and death, to our origins in Creation and the purpose of existence itself. Its answers will come in Jewish language, to be sure, and hopefully in rich and undiluted Jewish language. But it takes its place as a part of the human theological enterprise, and is healthily nourished today, as in all ages by contact with the best in philosophical, religious, and scientific thinking throughout the world.

Alongside its universal concerns, Jewish theology will also have to turn itself to the particular, seeking out the meaning of distinctive Jewish existence

and the special contribution that the Jewish people has to offer. We have just lived through the most terrible age of martyrdom in Jewish history, and ours is a time when being a Jew can still mean the potential sacrificing of one's children's lives so that our people may live. At the same time, our community suffers terrible losses due to assimilation and indifference. In the face of this reality, the would-be theologian in our midst must offer us some reason why the continuation of our existence is religiously vital, even at such a terrible price. To do anything less would betray the trust we as a community place in the theologian.

"Texts, symbols, and historical experiences" are the quarry out of which a contemporary Jewish theology is hewn. We are a tradition and a community shaped by and devoted to a text. In the primary sense, text refers here to the written Torah, read and completed each year by Jews in an ever-renewing cycle of commitment. Whatever the origins of that text, the Jewish religious community has accepted it as holy. It may no longer stand as the authoritative word of a commanding God, but it remains the most essential *sanctum* of the Jewish people, a source of guidance, wisdom, and ancient truth. Our relationship to it may at times include protest and rebellion along with love and devotion. But it remains *our* Torah, and we are its Jews. We can no more reject it and spiritually remain Jews than the fish can reject water, to use a classic image, or than the mature adult can reject his/her own legacy of memory, one that inevitably includes both pain and joy.

Many of our most important sources are written in the form of commentaries to this text. These the theologian must study, seeking to add her/his contemporary voice to this tradition. Here the aggadic strand is particularly important. Jewish theology in its most native form is narrative theology. The theologian was originally one who "told the tale"—that of Creation, of Exodus, of Abraham and Isaac, or of Ruth and Naomi—and subtly put it into a distinctive theological framework. This method is ours to study and continue, as is amply demonstrated by the widespread renewal of Midrashic writing in recent decades, a great sign of health within Jewish theological creativity. The contemporary Jewish theologian could do no better than to retell the tale in his or her own way.

Works of ancient *aggadah* were recreated by the Kabbalists within their own systematic framework to create a profound sort of mystic speech. Study of this aggadic/kabbalistic tradition and the search for ways to adapt it to contemporary usage is a key task of Jewish theology. The old aggadic/homiletic tradition is re-opened once again within Hasidism. Study of the creative use made of traditional sources by the Hasidic masters will serve as another important paradigm for contemporary efforts. The vast literature of Hebrew theological and moral treatises, a genre almost completely neglected other than by historical research, should also be important to the theologian. Contemporary Judaism is also enriched by the literary and poetic creations of many writers in Hebrew, Yiddish, and other languages of Jewish expression. These too should be part of "text" in its broadest sense, as should be the artistic and musical creations of many generations and varied Jewish communities throughout the ages.

I have already mentioned symbols as forms of silent religious speech. Here I would like to digress in order to add a reflection on the power of religious symbolism as constituted in the language of the Kabbalah. The Kabbalists taught of the ten *sefirot*, primal manifestations of the endless One that encompasses all of being. Each of these ten is represented in Kabbalistic language by one or more conventional terms and by a host of symbolic images. A certain face of the divine reality, to take one example, is conventionally called *hesed* or grace. But in Kabbalistic writings it is often referred to as "morning," "milk," "Abraham," "the right hand," "the priest," "love," "south," "lion (on the divine throne)," "myrtle twig," and a host of other names. Each of these terms, when used in the Kabbalists' symbolic reconstruction of the Hebrew language (for we are speaking of nothing less) has the same referent. What the Kabbalist has in effect created is a series of symbolic clusters, and when any member of a cluster is invoked, all the others are brought to mind as well. It is particularly important that each of these clusters contains elements of both classically Jewish and *natural* symbols. Though the Bible saw the variety and splendor of creation as the great testament to God's handiwork, nature was to a degree desacralized in later Judaism, which saw study, religious practice, and reflection on Jewish history as the chief areas where one should seek contact with the holy. The Kabbalist greatly reinvigorates

Jewish language by this symbolic *resacralization* of the natural world. Rivers, seas, seasons, trees, and heavenly bodies are all participants in the richly textured description or "mapping" of divinity, which is the Kabbalist's chief task.

Jewish theology needs to find a way to repeat this process, to "redeem" the natural for our theology and to bring the religious appreciation of this world into central focus as an object of Jewish concern. We need to do this first and foremost for our own souls. We need to lead our religious parlance out of the ghetto that allows for the sacrality only of what is narrowly ours and allow ourselves to see again the profound sacred presence that fills all of being. We also need to do this as members of the human religious community, all of which is charged in our day with creating a religious language that will re-root us in our natural surroundings and hopefully lead to a deeper and richer appreciation—and therefore less abuse and waste—of our natural heritage. In this area Jewish theology is lagging far behind the Jews, many of whom take leading roles in the movement for preservation of the planet, but with little sense that Judaism has anything to offer to these efforts.

The Judaism of Kook, Zeitlin, and Heschel is one that had begun to undertake this task. Shaken to our root by the experience of the Holocaust, our religious language took the predictable root of self-preservation by turning inward, setting aside this universalist agenda as non-essential to our own survival. We needed in those postwar years to concentrate fully on our own condition, first in outcry and later in the rebuilding of our strength, especially through the creation of Israel and its cultural and religious life. Now that time has begun to effect its inevitable healing on both mind and body, we find ourselves somewhat shocked and frightened by the rapid pace of this turn inward and the effect it has had on our people. In the face of these, we find ourselves turning back to the interrupted work of our nascent Jewish universalists and theologians of radical immanence, knowing that we need to resume their task.

The effect of these history-making decades is not lost, however. In adding "historical experiences" to the texts and symbols that comprise the sources of our Jewish learning, I mean to say that there has been a profound change wrought on the Jewish psyche by the events of this century. We are no

longer able to ignore the lessons of our own historical situation, as Jews sought to do for so many years. Emancipation, Zionism, and persecution have all joined forces to drive us from that ahistorical plateau where the Jewish people once thought it dwelt in splendid isolation. We need a theology that knows how to learn from history, from our role among the nations, from our experiences both as victim and as conqueror. Without the ability to handle these real-life situations with moral integrity and strength, our Judaism of texts and symbols will become mere cant.

Finally, we need to insist in our definition that all these are "the shared inheritance of all Jews." Nothing in our tradition belongs to an exclusive group within the Jewish people. This includes groups defined by religious viewpoint, by national origin, by gender, and all the rest. The legacy of Hasidism is too important to be left to the *hasidim* alone; Sephardic ballads and Yemenite dance no longer belong to the descendants of those groups alone. Words like "*halakhah*" or "*yeshivah*" should not be left to the Orthodox; they are the inheritance of all Israel. So are observances like dwelling in the *sukkah*, bathing in the *mikveh*, and dancing with the Torah. None of the legacy belongs exclusively to men, and none of it exclusively to women.

All of this should be sufficiently obvious not to need stating here, but that is unfortunately not the case. The theologian should be committed to the entirety of the Jewish people, more than to any sub-group or denomination within it. This will mean an ongoing devotion to the endless task of educating Jews—all kinds of Jews—and bringing them home to their roots in the people Israel. It is both a *mitsvah* and a privilege to participate in this task. For having a key role in it, the theologian should be grateful.

TORAH  
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