JEWISH THEOLOGY: A NEW BEGINNING

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Introduction

Who Is Writing This Book?

The author of this book is a Jewish seeker. I have been reading, studying, writing, and teaching theology to Jews—including many present and future rabbis—for nearly half a century. Yet I still think of myself primarily as a seeker. That means living in pursuit of an ever-present yet ever-elusive God, the One of Whom Scripture says: "Seek His face, always" (Ps. 105:4).[1] There is no end to such seeking. But it also means questing after truth, or at least *my* truth, one that wells up from my own life experience and feels authentic to who I am, as person and as Jew. Personal and intellectual honesty are essential to my life as a seeker; I try not to permit them to be overwhelmed by traditional claims or by emotional need. In this I am a longtime disciple of Rabbi Bunem of Przysucha who taught: " 'Do not deceive anybody (Lev. 25:17)'—not even yourself!"

These two realities, being a God seeker and a truth seeker, might seem to go hand in hand. Supposedly God *is* truth, after all, But in my case the simultaneous quest for both God and truth presents a terrible yet wonderful conflict. It is this conflict, and my ongoing attempt to resolve it, that the book you have just opened is all about.

I have understood since childhood that I am a deeply religious person, one easily moved by the power of sacred language, rites, and symbols. Through them I am sometimes able to enter into states of inner openness to a nameless and transcendent presence, that which I choose to call "God." Raised in a Jewish atheist household, I was powerfully attracted to the synagogue by the time I was seven or eight years old. The grandeur and mystery of its liturgy, the drama of its sacred calendar, and the infinite beauty of the Hebrew language and its classical literature all drew me in and have never ceased to fascinate me.

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* This chapter was first published in *Radical Judaism* by Arthur Green (pp. 1–33).

[1] All biblical translations are my own.

At the same time, I have long known that I am not a "believer" in the conventional Jewish or Western sense. I simply do not encounter God as "He" is usually described in the Western religious context, a Supreme Being or Creator who exists outside or beyond the universe, who created this world as an act of personal will, and who guides and protects it. Indeed, I do not know that such an "outside" or "beyond" exists. Challenges to conventional theological views, as well as to all the apologetic reformulations that seek to save them, came at me rather hard at the end of adolescence. I had chosen the religious life on my own, becoming quite fully (and somewhat compulsively) observant as an adolescent. But the regimen of Orthodox practice I had adopted, at the cost of terrible family battles, came crashing down during my college years, when I accepted that its theological underpinnings had been rooted in fantasy and denial of reality.

The challenges came from two directions: theodicy and critical history. The former included both personal loss (my mother died when I was eleven, and I had spent much of adolescence mourning her and struggling with that loss) and the fact of being a Jew in the immediate post-Holocaust generation. I remember the day my beloved East European grandfather found out just what had happened to the Jews of his town, as I recall my mother and grandmother going through newspaper lists of "relatives sought" in the early postwar years. These experiences, both personal and collective, made it clear to me that I could affirm neither particular providence nor a God who governed history. The God of childhood dreams, the One who could "make it all better" and show that life was indeed fair after all, was gone. My initiation into adulthood meant full acceptance of the arbitrariness of fate, including the finality of death.

At about the same time, I was exposed to Jewish scholarship, including the critical reading of the Hebrew Bible and its history. This exciting intellectual enterprise, which gripped my imagination, also undermined the residue of faith I had in Scripture as revealed. The text was edited, composed of many sources. Each of these represented a particular human community or interest group. What, then, was left of revelation? Where was the authority of Scripture, if the text was *merely* human? I struggled with what it could mean to claim that God had "given us His Torah" when the Torah text itself seemed to "evaporate" into so many documents. Without that, I had no basis for believing in a God who had commanded specific forms of religious behavior. (This seemed to be the essential "payoff" question in Judaism.) So the pillars of naive faith had given way, and its edifice lay in ruins. I had no answers to the great questions around which my religious life had been constructed.

I was no longer a believer, in the usual sense of that term, but I learned rather quickly that I was still a religious person, struggling with issues of faith. I still sought after God, perhaps even more so once I had given up on my naïve understandings of reality. That was the true beginning of my quest, one in which the only questions that mattered were the unanswerable ones. I absorbed much of Nietzsche, Kafka, and Camus in those years of questioning. From Nietzsche came the moment of joy at the death of my childhood God and the liberation from all that authority. But this gave way rather quickly to the bleak and empty universe Kafka so poignantly described, a joyless world from which God was absent and there was no air left to breathe, no room left to live, to love, or to create. From Camus and Nikos Kazantzakis came the noble call to make meaning on my own, to defy meaninglessness with creativity and moral action. But the more I sought to *create* a framework of meaning, picking up the shattered tablets of my onetime Jewish life, the more I came to realize that I was in fact only *rediscovering* patterns that were there to be seen, and had indeed been seen and articulated by countless generations before me.

It was in the course of this re-creation that I had to come back to the question of God. Who or what was the God I sought—and still seek today, half a century later!—once I had accepted that I was such a "nonbeliever" in the God of my childhood? The question seemed to be whether we post-naïve seekers dare to use the word "God" any more, and what we might—or might not—mean by it, while remaining personally and intellectually honest.

To explain this, I have to go back to the phrase "I was still a religious person." What can it mean to "be religious," in a Jewish (and not Buddhist) context if one does not "believe in God," at least as defined by the above parameters? It means that I still consider the sacred to be the most important and meaningful dimension of human life. "The sacred" refers to an inward, mysterious sense of awesome presence, a reality deeper than the kind we ordinarily experience. Life bears within it the possibility of inner transcendence; the moments when we glimpse it are so rare and powerful that they call upon us to transform the rest of our lives in their wake. These moments can come without warning, though they may be evoked by great beauty, by joy, by terror, or by anything else that causes us to stop and interrupt our ordinary all-encompassing and yet essentially superficial perception of reality. When that *mask of ordinariness* falls away, our consciousness is left with a moment of nakedness, a confrontation with a reality that we do not know how to put into language. The astonishment of such moments, that which my most revered teacher termed "radical amazement," is the

starting point of my religious life.[2] I believe, in other words, in the possibility and irreducible reality of religious experience. Such experience stands behind theology; it is the most basic datum with which the would-be theologian has to work. The awareness that derives from that range of human experiences, distilled by reflection, is the basis of religious thought, and therefore of everything I will have to say in the pages before you.

What is the nature of this experience? It is as varied as the countless individual human beings in the world, and potentially as multifarious as the moments in each of those human lives. In the midst of life, our ordinariness is interrupted. This may take place as we touch one of the edges of life, in a great confrontation with the new life of a child, or of an approaching death. We may see it in wonders of nature, sunrises and sunsets, mountains and oceans. It may happen to us in the course of loving and deeply entering into union with another, or in profound aloneness. Sometimes, however, such a moment of holy and awesome presence comes upon us without any apparent provocation at all. It may come as a deep inner stillness, quieting all the background noise that usually fills our inner chambers, or it may be quite the opposite, a loud rush and excitement that fills us to overflowing. It may seem to come from within or without, or perhaps both at once. The realization of such moments fills us with a sense of magnificence, of smallness, and of belonging, all at once. Our hearts well up with love for the world around us and awe at its grandeur. The experience is usually one that renders us speechless. But then we feel lucky and blessed if we have enough ties to a tradition that gives us language, that enables us to say, "The whole earth is filled with God's glory!"

For me God is not an intellectual proposition but rather the ground of life itself. It is the name I give to the reality I encounter in the kind of moment I have been describing, one that feels more authentic and deeply perceptive of truth than any other. I believe with complete faith that every human being is capable of such experience, and that these moments place us in contact with the elusive inner essence of being that I call "God." It is out of such moments that religion is born, our human response to the dizzying depths of an encounter we cannot—and yet so need to—name. I returned to tradition, the one of my ancestors and my early attempts at faith, because it gave me a language with which to name that inner "place."

[2] I am referring to Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972), with whom I had the great privilege of studying as a rabbinical student in the mid-1960s. I have been reading him, teaching his writings, and engaging in conversation with him for half a century. Much of this book may be seen as a response to, and dialogue with, his work.

I find myself less convinced by the dogmatic truth claims of tradition than powerfully attracted to the richness of its language, both in word and in symbolic gesture. Through the profound echo chamber of countless generations, tradition offers a way to respond, to channel the love and awe that rise up within us at such times, and to give a name to the holy mystery by which our lives are bounded.

I was about twenty years old when I began studying the Zohar (the thirteenth-century classic of medieval Kabbalah) and the teachings of the early Hasidic masters (of eighteenth-century Eastern Europe). This encounter with the mystical tradition saved Judaism for me. Without it I would have wandered away. These works, almost all composed in homiletical form, are the living antithesis to systematic theology. Often they were first offered as oral teachings, appropriate to a certain sacred or personal moment. Only later were they written down, in somewhat disembodied form. But they are endlessly rich in *insights*, insights into the soul, the human condition, and sometimes even the cosmic order. They are marked by the transforming awareness of a mysterious divine presence, to be found everywhere and in each moment, once we open our eyes to it. The combination of deep conviction and playful religious creativity in those sources immediately touched my soul, and continues to do so nearly a half-century later. The essential insights of Hasidism—that God is to be sought and found everywhere and in each moment, that our response to this deeper truth is both a daily practice and a lifelong adventure, and that our ongoing discovery of God can uplift and transform both soul and world—soon became *my* truths. The best semisystematic work where I found them presented in those early years was a little treatise called *Fundaments of Hasidism* by Hillel Zeitlin, one of the two key neo-Hasidic thinkers of interwar Europe (along with Martin Buber), and famous martyr of the Warsaw ghetto.[3] When I read those pages—Zeitlin's discussions entitled "Being and Nothingness," "The Self-Contraction of God," and "Uplifting Sparks"—I remember somehow knowing that I had found my own religious language, one that spoke deeply to my soul, while challenging rather than offending my mind. It has served me well across the decades, and I hope that I have come to serve it faithfully as well. One of my goals here is to share some of that language—and my enthusiasm for it—with you.

[3] I have published a collection of Zeitlin's writings, including this essay, in a volume entitled *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin*, Classics of Western Spirituality, New York (Paulist Press) 2012.

The most important religious questions, I understood from the beginning, are universal: the quest for meaning, the purpose of human existence, the true nature of both world and self. I think about these overwhelmingly universal matters from within the context of a very particular religious language. I am not only a Jewish theologian, working within a religious language and historical context familiar to no more than the tiniest fraction of humanity. As one who draws deeply upon the language and symbolism of the Jewish mystical tradition, I represent a minority within this minority. I am a neo-Hasidic Jew, one influenced by the lives and teachings of the early Hasidic masters, but choosing not to live within the strict parameters of religious praxis that characterize Hasidism, and not sharing the later Hasidic disdain for secular education or for the modern world as a whole. It has long been clear to me that the insights into reality to be found in the texts, lives, and stories of the Jewish mystical and Hasidic tradition need to be shared more broadly, something I have tried to do over a lifetime of writing and teaching. I also have a sense that this spiritual legacy should not belong to Jews alone. Its insights into the great universal questions, though expressed in uniquely Jewish language, have importance for Jews and non-Jews alike, for all who take religious questions seriously and who understand the critical hour in which we live.

I also think of myself as a *religious humanist*. Humanism means an understanding that our fate, along with that of the entire planet, depends on human action. There is no one to hold back our hand, to keep us from destroying this garden in which we have been placed. We are totally responsible. *Religious* humanism means that we will fulfill that awesome role only by realizing that we are part of a reality infinitely more ancient, more profound, and more unified than any of us can express or know. Much of this book is an unpacking of the ways in which I see mysticism and humanism, two seemingly very distinct approaches to life, complementing one another.

The book is clearly and unabashedly Jewish in its language. Its examples are brought mainly from the tradition I know best and from my own life of religious experience. But its address is to a new and broad religious community, one that transcends conventional borders in order to deal with questions too big to be confined. My job is to translate the specifics in a way that carries them beyond the particular Jewish context and renders them accessible to everyone. If I have succeeded, the book will be "heard" as a clarion call, coming from an ancient tradition, for a transformation of human consciousness uniquely befitting this critical hour in human history, a new and universal religious awareness that will serve as an enabling vehicle for other changes that will soon be required of us.

I have lived much of my life at the juncture of historical scholarship and religious creativity. Trained as a historian of premodern Jewish thought, I am still committed to scholarly understanding, as some sections of this book will attest. But I have become more concerned with what Jews might believe in the uncertain future and what we as an ancient civilization might have to say to humanity at the present moment. This takes on a special urgency in the times in which we live. The most essential truth I glean from Hasidic teachings, the unity and holiness of all life, even of all existence, is one the world most urgently needs to hear. Having reached that point in my own life where you notice "the day is short," it is time for me to give a full account of what I have learned along this journey and pass it on to another generation. "The day is short," however, applies not only to the course of my own life. I believe that we stand at a great moment of transition in human and planetary history. Unless we take drastic steps to change our way of living, our patterns of consumption, and our most essential understanding of our relationship to the world in which we exist, we are at great risk of destroying our earthly home and rendering it a wasteland. Our future, and that of our planet, is in our hands. In this moment I believe that a universalized reading of the Hasidic legacy has much to offer.

While I do not await a God who will intervene in history to save the planet from us, God may be present in another way as we face the crucial challenge of our age. Religion, a more powerful human force in our day than anyone would have imagined, will have a major role to play in this needed transformation. If something we call God dwells within our sacred traditions (Ps. 22:4), we people of faith may indeed find a way to bring forth a ray of what we might call divine salvation. We need to reshape our religious languages in such a way that they will inspire the great collective act of *teshuvah*, "return" or "repentance," required of us at this moment. We need to repent of our cavalier treatment of the biosphere in which we live, of our indifferent overconsumption and waste of resources, of our virtual disdain for nonhuman forms of life. We need to repent of the separation we have created between the sacred and the mundane, between the godly and the natural. Without such *teshuvah* humanity will not survive. Without marshaling the power of the religious and mythic imagination, we will not be able to make the turn we must in order to exist. Read this book as a call to that collective and universal human effort.

Toward a Postmodern Judaism

Chapter 1 of the book centers on a discussion of religion and its relationship to evolution, beginning with the biological evolution of species and leading into an evolutionary approach to the history of religion itself. The battle against evolution in the United States, from the Scopes trial to ongoing media fascination with political candidates' views of the subject, represents the last great gasp of traditional religion's struggle against the inevitable triumph of modernity. While the modern consciousness was in the making a good century before Darwin, no one defines more than he does the impossibility of going backward and wishing out of existence the great gulf that modernity has opened up between the pursuit of truth and a literalist faith in biblically based religion. It is because of Darwin—and "Darwin" here means not only his evolutionary biology but also the accompanying evidence of geology, astrophysics, and a host of other scientific data regarding the origins of our planet and its life system—that theology has been transformed. Religion's response to Darwin has extended over a century. But, as recent headlines tell us, the conversation is not quite over.

The "new atheists" of the past decade have come largely from the scientific community, convinced post-Darwinians who are shocked at the resurgence of religion in our society. They have emerged from scientific laboratory and university classroom to take on the public fight against religious, mostly Christian, fundamentalism, often feeling that they need to save the entire modern enterprise from medieval Philistines who would bring it crashing down. Unfortunately some of these writers have little sophistication in approaching religion, tending to view it simplistically and paint it all with a single brush. "Religion," to them, seems to allow for nothing other than literal belief in nonsensical biblical tales and various accruing superstitions. This caricature obviates the need for serious dialogue and the encounter thus devolves into mutual distrust and recrimination, great fodder for the media but quite useless for the future of civilization.

In fact much of theological conversation in modern times has focused on the *idea* of God rather than on an actual Being who precedes this universe and is responsible for its existence. Philosophically, of course, it is more Immanuel Kant than Charles Darwin who is responsible for this change. But the inevitability of this move is most loudly proclaimed by the fact that we talk about the biohistory of our planet and its species without recourse to divine intervention. If God is not present in "Creation," as the medievals already understood, neither providence nor the possibility of miracles remains. With that, there is little more to talk about than the human idea of God and the various psychological and social benefits—or perhaps detriments— that such belief entails. The best representatives of modernity in the Jewish theological conversation, Hermann Cohen in the German neo-Kantian context and Mordecai M. Kaplan against the background of American pragmatism, both operated within these bounds.

The most impassioned and inspiring Jewish religious voices in the twentieth century were those shaped by religious existentialism and phenomenology, attempts to set aside or "bracket" the seemingly insurmountable modern objections to the claims of faith and to rebuild Judaism around an intimate personal relationship with God, a renewed study of the premodern Jewish sources, and the need for religious community. In varying ways, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, J.B. Soleveitchik, and A.J. Heschel all fall into this category. They opened up for moderns the possibility of a Jewish faith marked by emotional resonance and profundity. But like their existentialist counterparts in Christendom, these thinkers were all longer in passion than in defining precisely what they meant by "God," invoking the old Pascalian bon mot decrying definition in matters of faith. None of them was quite able or willing to tell his readers just what the God of love, devotion, and demand might have to do with the history of our physical universe, the evolution of life, and the emergence of humanity from among the primates. None of these sophisticated and university-educated thinkers was willing to enter the lists against the Darwinian narrative (as did the late Lubavitcher rebbe, by contrast), but neither were they willing to make it their own or imagine a Judaism that fully embraced it. The same was mostly the case with regard to biblical and Near Eastern scholarship and the obvious challenges they offered to Judaism. Existential religion chose to operate on a plane of reality different from that of the scientific worldview and thus to have little intersection with it.

The challenge to modernity that arose in the second half of the twentieth century had much to do with the aftermath of World War II and the onset of the nuclear age, the realization that the scientifically dominated worldview, hallmark of the modern era, had brought us not to peace and understanding but rather to potential and real viciousness and destruction on a previously unimagined scale. Beginning in the 1960s, many of the best minds of the West began to look outside the modern, progressivist, scientific canon and turned instead to areas of human knowledge that had been overthrown or ignored in the rush toward modernity. Some in fact turned to religious existentialism, which had its greatest influence in the early postwar era. Many others, however, sought out more obscure sources of truth. The hope was that somewhere in the recesses of past human creativity we

would find the wisdom that might help us change our way of life, slow the maddening pace of contemporary existence, and desist from the violent behaviors that social Darwinism seemed to proclaim an inevitable part of our biological legacy. That truth might be found by sitting with a Zen master, by breathing with the Yogis, by smoking a Native American peace pipe, or by climbing the Himalayas (both real and metaphorical) to reach some obscure Tibetan monastery. As we watched the great crisis of our era shift from the threat of imminent nuclear self-destruction to that of environmental degradation and the overconsumption of resources, the urgency of that quest only grew greater. Even Kabbalah, perhaps the best-known of Western esoteric traditions, has come to be considered a possible source of such alternative insight as to how to live in this new era.

This perceived weakening of modernity's hold on intelligent conversation pulled in several directions at once. Surely it reinvigorated the surviving circles of premodernists, those who had all along lived on the sidelines of the intellectual mainstream and continued in their classical premodern constructions of faith, based either on scriptural literalism (Protestant evangelicals and most Muslims) or on theological premises that dated from centuries before modernity (Catholics, Orthodox Jews, and Muslim intellectuals). These bastions of alternative visions of reality have all demonstrated surprising strength in recent decades, both in holding on to their own respective flocks and in attracting significantly numerous converts. To one degree or another, all of them have stood as challengers of modernity, insisting on holding on to truth claims (usually regarding both the twin pillars of Creation and revelation) that modern scientific scholarship denies. Traditionalist Jewish and Catholic intellectuals, following long internal traditions, found more room for accommodation with science but avoided dealing with some of the toughest issues. Muslims, who felt that modernity had been imposed on them from without by dint of imperialist conquest, were the most resentful, fueling the frightening resurgence of fundamentalism that we see today. Only a few Muslim intellectuals were able to defend the old broad-minded traditions of Islam's hosting and embracing scientific truth.

During the same era, however, a very different turn toward religion as the source of an alternative vision has been taking place. Here the emphasis is on *consciousness* rather than on Scripture or doctrine as the source of truth. Beginning with the psychedelic revolution of the 1960s (quickly corrupted, to be sure, but also much too readily dismissed by both government and media), there arose an interest in altered states of mind, deeper realms of consciousness, and a sense that our notions of "truth," based

on sense perception and logical deduction, might be the limited vision of a narrow range of mental activity, challenged by the vast experience of prophets, mystics, and meditators through the ages. It may be said that this approach to religion took the existentialists' awareness of inner reality as its point of departure, but sought to anchor it in a nuanced understanding of consciousness that was open to elements of both mysticism and scientific analysis. This new receptiveness generally embraced Eastern rather than Western teachings, primarily because they were offered more in the spirit of experiential learning and without insistence on either dogma or ritual. (Eastern religions in their native habitat are of course replete with both of these, but those who imported them to the West were able to repackage the essential insights, shorn of their traditional baggage.) This branch of the postmodern turn toward religion generally, though not always, eschewed orthodoxies and exclusivist claims, looking rather toward cross-traditional insights and teachings. Whether dressed in the trappings of Buddhism, Vedanta, Sufism, or Kabbalah, it tended to wear them lightly. Its essential faith claim is that there is a truth greater than that offered by the scientific worldview, one lying beneath the surface of reality and accessible by means of meditation, silence, chant, or other forms of disciplined religious praxis. The verbal articulation of such inner realities is often difficult; this too the "new mystics" have inherited from the existentialists. Here the relationship between the rational-scientific perception of reality and this religious (more often called "spiritual") claim is placed less in confrontational terms than is the case with Western-based fundamentalism. Scientific truth is not "wrong"; it is simply not the entire picture.

This book draws on both of these approaches to religion and its role in proclaiming a truth or reality that is an alternative to that of our modern scientific worldview. The reader will immediately see that I take both Scripture and tradition quite seriously, though I am far from literalism or fundamentalism. I am also much influenced by the rediscovery of mystical consciousness that has taken place in our time. Though my theology and the roots of my imagination are deeply and particularly Jewish, I write with a broad awareness of contemporary, including Eastern, religious thought. In proposing a Jewish theology for the twenty-first century (or the approaching fifty-ninth, if you prefer), I proceed from an understanding that the twentieth century's battles are very much over and that an essential reframing of our response to the great religious questions is needed. I hope the reader will find some pieces of it in these pages.

The title of the book shows my roots in the Radical Theology movement of the late 1960s. I have recalled elsewhere a conversation I had with my

mentor Abraham Joshua Heschel in which I asked him what he thought about Radical Theology, a movement that spoke of the "death of God," which Heschel had termed blasphemy.[4] But this very "death of God," a realization that conventional Western religious language had reached a point of exhaustion, was also pushing away much theological debris, making room for precisely the sort of "depth theology" that Heschel himself had advocated. "Radical theology is very important," he answered, "but it has to begin with the teachings of the later Hasidic masters."[5] Some forty years later (a number of some significance among Jewish journeyers!), I hope this book is that theology.

The "radicalism" of this work may not be what some readers would expect. I am primarily a thinker and teacher, not an activist. Although I share strong liberal or progressivist views on most political and social issues, this book is about a different sort of radicalism, one that takes us back to our deepest spiritual roots and challenges us to rethink our lives from that perspective. It has implications in the social sphere, to be sure, but its core lies in the realm of a contemporary mystical understanding of who we are, how we got here, and where we are going. In Jewish terms, it is a call to return to our Source, the one that underlies and precedes all our so-venerated "sources."

A few words about some of the readers I have in mind would probably be appropriate here. In earlier times, theology was written only for those who lived within a particular religious community and shared the symbols and liturgical language of that faith. Its function was largely to explicate those symbols and to give an intelligible account of how they bore that community's message. But given the wider concerns and the urgency of the hour, I have set myself a different goal. I am writing a theological work for a broad and as yet undefined audience. The fact that I am writing in English rather than Hebrew is significant to me. It means that my community of readers should include both Jews and non-Jews. I especially welcome readers of Christian or Islamic heritage. Despite the differences in religious language, they will find many key issues, and much of my own struggle with them, quite familiar. This audience will also, I hope, embrace readers who have been exposed to the religious languages of the East, including some of the many who are making a journey "homeward" after encountering meditation and spirituality first in an Eastern setting. I think they will find the language spoken here to represent a Judaism closer to those teachings than they might have expected.

[4] *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), pp. ixf.

[5] Heschel actually referred to two specific Hasidic authors, the *Sefat Emet* (R. Judah Leib Alter of Ger, 1847–1905) and R. Zadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin (1823–1900).

As a teacher, I also think of the broadest circle of "my students" as readers of this book. These include rabbis of all denominations and none, as well as many other Jewish seekers. Some of them will undoubtedly feel pushed beyond their usual comfort zones in confronting the more radical ideas found here, whether with regard to God, nature, and evolution, or those in the later sections dealing with *halakhah* and Jewish practice or the Jewish people, the state of Israel, and the Jewish diaspora. I speak more frankly and less defensively here than is usual in Jewish circles, and I anticipate some protest.

The object is not just to explicate Judaism, to tell you what our tradition has to say about the world, and why it all makes sense. There are plenty of books, including some good ones, seeking to do that. I want to reflect, as a Jew, on the big and universal issues: what we might mean today by saying "God"; the purpose of human existence, how we got here, where we are going, and what we can do to save this beloved planet. I can do so only by speaking my own religious language. But the objective is never just to explain or defend that language; rather, it is to use it as a pathway to universal insights that lie within it. At times this process will demand your patience and a bit of perseverance, especially as I lead you into the labyrinth of Kabbalistic symbolism. Please stay with me; I promise you will be well rewarded.

Y-H-W-H: God and Being

In the Beginning

I open with a theological assertion. As a religious person I believe that the evolution of species is the greatest sacred drama of all time. It is a tale—perhaps even *the* tale—in which the divine waits to be discovered. It dwarfs all the other narratives, memories, and images that so preoccupy the mind of religious traditions, including our own. We Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all overinvolved with proclaiming—or questioning—the truth of our own particular stories. Did Moses really receive the Torah from God at Mount Sinai? Did Jesus truly rise from the tomb? Was Muhammad indeed God's chosen messenger? We refine our debates about these forever, each group certain that its own narrative is at the center of universal history. In the modern world, where all these tales are challenged, we work

out sophisticated and nonliteralist ways of proclaiming our faith in them. But there is a *bigger* story, infinitely bigger, and one that we all share. How did we get here, we humans, and where are we going? For more than a century and a half, educated Westerners have understood that this is the tale of evolution. But we religious folk, the great tale-tellers of our respective traditions, have been guarded and cool toward this story and have hesitated to make it our own. The time has come to embrace it and to uncover its sacred dimensions.

I believe that "Creation," or perhaps more neutrally stated, "origins," a topic almost entirely neglected in both Jewish and liberal Christian theology of the past century, must return as a central preoccupation in our own day. This indeed has much to do with the ecological agenda and the key role that religion needs to play in changing our attitudes toward the world within which we humans live.[6] But it also emerges from our society's growing acceptance of scientific explanations—those of the nuclear physicist, the geologist, the evolutionary biologist, and others—for the origins of the world we have inherited. The finality of this acceptance, which I share, seemingly means the end of a long struggle between so-called scientific and religious worldviews. This leaves those of us who speak the language of faith in a peculiar situation. Is there then no connection between the God we know and encounter daily within all existence and the emergence and history of our universe? Does the presence of eternity we feel (whether we call ourselves "believers" or not) when we stand atop great mountains or at the ocean water's edge exist only within our minds? Is our faith nothing more than one of those big mollusk shells we used to put up against our ears, convinced we could hear in them the ocean's roar? Is our certainty of divine presence, so palpable to the religious soul, *merely* a poetic affirmation, corresponding to nothing in the reality described by science? We accept the scientific account of how we got here, or at least understand that the conversation about that process and its stages lies within the domain of science. Yet we cannot absent God from it entirely. Even if we have left behind the God of childhood, the One who assures and guarantees "fairness" in life, the presence of divinity within nature remains essential to our perception of reality. A God who has no place in the process of "how we got here" is a God who begins in the human mind, a mere *idea* of God, a post-Kantian construct created to guarantee morality, to assure us of the

[6] In the background here are such works as Thomas Berry's *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988); Berry and Brian Swimme's *The Universe Story* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992); and E.O. Wilson's *The Creation* (New York: Norton, 2006).

potential for human goodness, or for some other noble purpose. But that is not God. The One of which I speak here indeed goes back to origins and stands prior to them, though perhaps not in a clearly temporal sense.[7] A God who underlies all being, who *is* and dwells within (rather than "who controls" or "oversees") the evolutionary process is the One about which—or about "Whom"—we tell the great sacred tale, the story of existence.

I thus insist on the centrality of "Creation," but I do so from the position of one who is not quite a theist, as understood in the classical Western sense. I do not affirm a Being or a Mind that exists separate from the universe and acts upon it intelligently and willfully. This puts me quite far from the contemporary "creationists" or from what is usually understood as "intelligent design" (but see more on this below). My theological position is that of a *mystical panentheist*, one who believes that God is present throughout all of existence, that Being or Y-H-W-H underlies and unifies all that is.[8] At the same time (and this is panentheism as distinct from pantheism), this whole is mysteriously and infinitely greater than the sum of its parts, and cannot be fully known or reduced to its constituent beings.[9] "Transcendence" in the context of such a faith does not refer to a God "out there" or "over there" somewhere beyond the universe, since I do not know the existence of such a "there." Transcendence means rather that God—or Being—is so fully present in the here and now of each moment that we could not possibly grasp the depth of that presence. Transcendence thus dwells *within* immanence. There is no ultimate duality here, no "God and world," no "God, world, and self," only one Being and its many faces. Those who seek consciousness of it come to know that it is indeed *eyn sof*, without end. There is no end to its unimaginable depth, but so too there is no border, no limit, separating that unfathomable One from anything that is. Infinite Being in every instant flows through all finite beings. "Know this

[7] I have discussed this nontemporal sense of priority briefly in *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2003), pp. 55f. The point is that the One underlies the many then, now, and forever. This underlying is the true nature of its priority in the mystical context, one which is converted into temporality as mystical insight comes to be expressed in mythic narrative (since stories require a "before" and "after"). The contemporary Midrashist might see this hinted at in the syntactical awkwardness of *bereshit bara'*.

[8] The relationship of "being" and "Being" in English is roughly comparable to that of *HaWaYaH* ("existence") and Y-H-W-H (its consonantal equivalent, rearranged) in Hebrew.

[9] This puts me in the camp, as Hillel Zeitlin would have said, of the Ba'al Shem Tov's pantheism, as distinguished from Spinoza's. The distinction between these was key to Zeitlin's return to Judaism and die starting point of his neo-Hasidic philosophy. See his remarks in *Barukh Spinoza* (Warsaw: Tushiya, 1914), pp. 135ff., as well as in *Di Benkshaft nokh Sheynheyt* (Warsaw: Velt-Bibliotek, 1910), pp. 34f. See discussion above, pp. 71f.

day and set it upon your heart that Y-H-W-H is *elohim*" (Deut. 4:39)—that God within you *is* the transcendent.[10] And the verse concludes: "There is nothing else."

By *mystical* panentheism I mean that this underlying oneness of being is accessible to human experience and reveals itself to humans—indeed, it reveals itself everywhere, always—as the deeper levels of the human mind become open to it. Access to it requires a lifting of veils, a shifting of attention to those inner realms of human consciousness where mystics, and not a few poets, have always chosen to abide. The "radical otherness" of God, so insisted upon by Western theology, is not an ontological otherness but an otherness of perspective. To open one's eyes to God is to see Being—the only Being there is—in a radically different way. Such a unitive view of reality is *entirely other* (*ganz andere*, in theological German) from the way we usually see things, yet it is the same reality that is being viewed. I am also one who knows that religious truth belongs to the language of poetry, not discursive prose. I recognize fully and without regret that theology is an art, not a science. We people of faith have nothing we can prove; attempts to do so only diminish what we have to offer. We can only testify, never prove. Our strength lies in grandeur of vision, in an ability to transport the conversation about existence and origins to a deeper plane of thinking. My faith, but also my human experience, tells me that this shift profoundly enhances our understanding of our own lives and of the world in which we live. Opening our minds, and ultimately the mind of our society, to the truth accessible from that inner "place" constitutes our best hope for inspiring change in the way we live on this earth. There is nothing *mere* about poetic vision.

This point in the discussion calls for a greater clarification of the terms "One," "Being," and "God," which I now appear to be using quite interchangeably. Am I speaking of a "what" or a "who," the reader has a right to ask. Let me answer clearly. When I refer to "God," I mean the inner force of existence itself, that of which one might say: "Being *is*." I refer to it as the "One" because it is the single unifying substratum of all that is. To speak of Being as a religious person, however, is to speak of it not detachedly, in scientific "objectivity," but rather with full engagement of the self, in *love* and *awe*.[11] These two great emotions together characterize the religious mind

[10] I intentionally quote the verse around which Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi wove his essential mystical treatise *Sha'ar ha-Yiḥud veha-Emunah* (the second part of *Tanya*), to indicate the strong Hasidic roots of the theology I am articulating here.

[11] Love and awe (*ahavah ve-yir'ah, deḥilo u-reḥimo*) are taken by the Jewish ethical literature to be the twin pillars of religious emotion, ever to be kept in balance with

and, when carried to their fullest, make for our sense of the holy. A religious person is one who perceives or experiences holiness in the encounter with existence; the forms of religious life are intended to evoke this sense of the holy. In a mental state that cannot be fully described in words, such a person *hears* Being say: "I am." All of our personifications of the One are in response to that inner "hearing."

In biblical language, the "I am" of Sinai is already there behind the first "Let there be" of Genesis.[12] Creation *is* revelation, as the Kabbalists understood so well. To say it in more neutral terms, we religious types personify Being because we see ourselves as living in relationship to the underlying One. I seek to *respond* to the "I am" that I have been privileged to hear, to place myself at its service in carrying forth this great mission of the evolving life process. To do so, I choose to personify, to call Being by this ancient name "God."[13] In doing this, I am proclaiming my love and devotion to Being, my readiness to live a life of seeking and responding to its truth. But implied here is also a faith that in some mysterious way Being *loves me*, that it rejoices for a fleeting instant in dwelling within me, delighting in this unique form that constitutes my existence, as it delights in each of its endlessly diverse manifestations.

Creation: Reframing the Tale

With regard to "Creation," I understand the task of the theologian to be one of *reframing*, accepting the accounts of origins and natural history offered by the scientific consensus, but helping us to view them in a different way, one that may guide us toward a more profound appreciation of that same reality. The tale of life's origins and development, including its essential building block of natural selection, is well known to us as moderns. But what would it mean to recount that tale with our eyes truly open?

one another. For the Kabbalist they represent the proper human embodiments of *ḥesed* and *din*, the right and left hands of the cosmic Self. Classic treatments include Meir Ibn Gabbai's *'Avodat ha-Qodesh* (Venice, 1567), 1:25–28, and (much expanded) Elijah Da Vidas, *Reshit Ḥokhmah* (Venice, 1579). In this matter I find myself wholly within the classical tradition.

[12] In the idiom of Midrash, the hidden *aleph* of *'anokhi* lies behind the dualizing *bet* of *bereshit*. See my discussion in "The Aleph-Bet of Creation: Jewish Mysticism for Beginners," *Tikkun* 7:4 (1992).

[13] The reader may properly hear an echo of Martin Buber's words in *Eclipse of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952), pp. 7ff. I too recognize the difficulty in continuing to use this word, alongside the impossibility of doing without it.

We would understand the entire course of evolution, from the simplest life forms millions of years ago, to the great complexity of the human brain (still now only barely understood), and proceeding onward into the unknown future, to be a *meaningful* process. There is a One that is ever revealing itself to us within and behind the great diversity of life. That One is Being itself, the constant in the endlessly changing evolutionary parade. Viewed from our end of the process, the search that leads to discovery of that One is our human quest for meaning. But turned around, seen from the perspective of the constantly evolving life energy, evolution can be seen as an ongoing process of revelation or self-manifestation. We discover; it reveals. It reveals; we discover. As the human mind advances (from our point of view), understanding more of the structure, process, and history of the ever-evolving One, we are being *given* (from its point of view) ever-greater insight into who we are and how we got here.

This ongoing self-disclosure is the result of a deep and mysterious inner drive, the force of Being directed from within, however imperfectly and stumblingly, to manifest itself ever more fully, in ever more diverse, complex, and interesting ways. That has caused it to bring about, in the long and slow course of its evolution, the emergence of a mind that can reflect upon the process, articulate it, and strive toward the life of complete awareness that will fulfill its purpose. Here on this smallish planet in the middle of an otherwise undistinguished galaxy, something so astonishing has taken place that it indeed demands to be called by the biblical term "miracle," rather than by the Greco-Latin "nature," even though the two are pointing to the exact same set of facts. The descendants of one-celled creatures grew and developed, emerged onto dry land, learned survival skills, developed language and thought, until a subset of them could reflect on the nature of this entire process and seek to derive meaning from it.

The coming to be of "higher" or more complex forms of life, and eventually of humanity, is not brought about by the specific and conscious planning of what is sometimes called "intelligent design." But neither is it random and therefore inherently without meaning. It is rather the result of an inbuilt movement within the whole of being, the underlying *dynamis* of existence striving to be manifest ever more fully in minds that it brings forth and inhabits, through the emergence of increasingly complex and reflective selves. I think of that underlying One in immanent terms, a Being or life force that dwells within the universe and all its forms, rather than a Creator from beyond who forms a world that is "other" and separate from its own Self. This One—the only One that truly is—lies within and behind all the diverse forms of being that have existed since the beginning of time;

it is the single Being (as the Hebrew name Y-H-W-H indicates)[14] clothed in each individual being and encompassing them all.[15]

If we could learn to view our biohistory this way, the incredible grandeur of the evolutionary journey would immediately unfold before us. We Jews revere the memory of one Nahshon ben Aminadav, the first person to step into the Sea of Reeds after Israel left Egypt. The sea did not split, the story goes, until he was up to his neck in water. What courage! But what about the courage of the first creature *ever* to emerge from sea onto dry land? Do we appreciate the magnificence of *that* moment? Or the first to fly, to take wing into the air? Or the moment (of course each of these is a long, slow process rather than a "moment," but the drama is no less great) when animals were divided from plants, when one sort of being was able take nourishment directly from the soil while another was able to exist without this form of nourishment, developing the mechanism to "feed" on plant, and then animal, life. How is it possible, with all of them descending from the same single-celled creatures?

The incredibly complex *interplay* of forces and the thick web of mutual dependency among beings are no less amazing than the distance traversed in this long evolutionary journey. The interrelationships between soil, plants, and insects, or those between climate, foliage, and animal life, all leave us breathless as we begin to contemplate them. It is these very intricacies and complexities that have led the religious fundamentalists to hold fast to the claim that there must be a greater intelligence behind it all, that such complexity can only reflect the planning of a supernatural Mind. But they miss the point of the religious moment here. Our task as religious persons is not to offer counterscientific *explanations* for the origin of life. Our task is to *notice*, to pay attention to, the incredible wonder of it all, and to find God in that moment of paying attention.

There is indeed something "supernatural" about existence, something entirely out of the ordinary, beyond any easy expectation. But I understand the "supernatural" to reside wholly *within* the "natural."[16] The difference

[14] My discussion of this theological viewpoint, including its roots in an understanding of the divine name, begins in my book *Seek My Face.*

[15] Among the rabbinic phrases that leap to mind here are *ke-haden qumtsa' di-levushey minney u-veyh* ("like the locust, whose garbing comes forth from his own self" [Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 21:5]) and *hu meqomo shel 'olam ve-eyn ha-'olam meqomo* ("He is the 'place' of the world; the world is not His place" [Bereshit Rabbah 68:10]).

[16] The presence of the miraculous within the natural has a long history in Jewish theological conversation. Some key prior participants in this conversation are Nahmanides, the MaHaRaL of Prague, and Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev. On the last of these, see my article

between them is one of perception, the degree to which our "inner eye" is open. The whole journey is a supernatural one, not because some outside Being made it happen but because Being itself, residing in those simplest and most ancient of life-forms, pushing ever forward, step after simple step, to reach where we are today, continues to elude our complete understanding. The emergence of both bees and blossoms, and the relationship between them, took place over millions of years, step by evolutionary step. How could that have happened? There is an endless ingenuity to this self-manifesting Being, an endless stream of creativity of which we are only the tiniest part. If we do not destroy or do too much irreversible damage to our planet, it will continue to bring forth ever more diverse and creative manifestations long after we are gone.

The poetic reframing of our contemporary tale of origins that I am proposing here might be better understood by reference to a prior example, one with which we happen to have an intimate bond. I refer to the opening chapter of the Hebrew Bible. The authors of Genesis 1 effected a remarkable transformation of the creation myth that existed in their day. The common theology of the ancient Near East, reflected in both Canaanite and Mesopotamian sources, featured the rising up of the primal forces of chaos, represented by Yam and Tiamat, gods of the sea, against the order being imposed by the younger but more powerful sky gods. The defeat of that primordial rebellion was the background of Creation; earth was established upon the carcasses of the vanquished. That tale of uprising and its bloody end, now largely forgotten, was well known to the biblical writers and their audiences.[17] It is reflected in various passages in the prophets, Psalms, and Job, and is subtly hinted at even within the Genesis narrative. But those who wrote Genesis 1 reframed the story completely. Everything was created in harmony, willfully, by a single God who kept saying: "Good! Good!" in response to His creations, giving His blessing to each.

That reshaped tale helped to form and sustain Western civilization for several thousand years. The faith that God loves and affirms Creation provides the moral undergirding for all of Western religion, manifest differently in each of the three dominant faiths. Some believed it naively and

"Levi Yizhak of Berdichev on Miracles" in my volume *The Heart of the Matter* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2014), pp. 254ff.

[17] Jonathan Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). For the presence and survival of this theme in later Judaism, see Michael Fishbane's "The Great Dragon Battle and Talmudic Redaction," in his *The Exegetical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 41–55.

literally; others interpreted it and tried to reconcile it with various other ways of thinking. I am suggesting that we need to undertake a similar effort of transformation for our current "Creation" story. Our civilization has been transformed in the past century and a half in no small part by our acceptance of a new series of tales of origin, an account that begins with the Big Bang (which itself may turn out to be myth) and proceeds through the long saga of the origins of our solar system, the geohistory of our planet, the emergence of life, and biological evolution. Nuclear physicists and cosmologists have become the new Kabbalists of our age, speculating in ever more refined ways on the first few seconds of existence much as our mystical sages meditated on the highest triad of the ten divine emanations. The picture that science offers is one of unimaginably violent explosion, of particles hurtling through indescribably vast reaches of space, and only then of the emergence of an order—solar systems, gravity, orbits, air, and water—that makes for the possibility of life's existence.[18] As living things emerge and develop we are again presented with a tale of violent and bloody struggle, that of each species and creature to eat and not be eaten, to strive for its moment at the top of the evolutionary mound of corpses. This story too, I am suggesting, is in need of reformulation by a new and powerful harmonistic vision, one that will allow even the weakest and most threatened of creatures a legitimate place in this world and will call upon us not to wipe it out by careless whim. This is the role of today's religion.

How would such a reframed tale read? It would be a narrative of the great reaching out by the inner One that inhabits each of us and binds us all together, a constant stretching forth of Y-H-W-H ("Being") in the endless adventure of becoming HWYH (Hebrew for "being" or "existence"), or of the One garbing itself in the multicolored garment of diversity and multiplicity. Every creature and each cell within it would be viewed as part of this tale, a mini-adventure within the infinitely complex narrative web that embraces us all. The meaning of this great journey would remain quite mysterious, but with a glimmer of hope that somewhere in the distant future "we" might figure it all out. The evolutionary movement forward would be seen as a striving toward complexity, toward ever-thicker and ever-richer patterns of self-manifestation.

[18] Parallel structures of thought in Kabbalah and astrophysics have been noted by several writers, including Daniel Matt, *God and the Big Bang* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1996); David Nelson, *Judaism, Physics, and God* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2005); and Howard Smith, *Let There Be Light: Modern Cosmology and Kabbalah* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2006).

Does this One *know* where it is going? Here I come trickily close to, yet remain distinct from, the advocates of intelligent design as they are usually understood. On the one hand, I do not attribute human-like consciousness to the One. There is no "plan" of Creation, no sense that humans are the apex or final goal of the process. I do not believe that the complexity or intricacy of the natural order is evidence of such design. As I said, we religious folk have no evidence, only testimony. Any attempt to claim otherwise only confuses the picture. On the other hand, however, it is fair to say that all mind and all consciousness ever to exist are part of the One. Mystics have always understood that this One transcends time, as the name Y-H-W-H itself indicates. All minds are thus one with Mind, as all beings are contained within Being. In this sense we can say that the fullness of Being's self-manifestation, including our understanding of it, is there from the start, not in the sense of active or intentional foreknowledge, but as potential that is ever unfolding. The One "knows" all because the One *is* all, all that ever was, is, and will be, in an undivided Self.

The reader who is aware of Jewish mystical language will understand that I am rereading contemporary evolutionary theory in the light of Kabbalistic thought. Kabbalah understands all of existence as eternally pouring forth from *ḥokhmah*, primordial Wisdom or Mind. *Ḥokhmah* is the primal point of existence, symbolized by the Hebrew letter *yod*, which is itself hardly more than a dot. This point, infinitesimally small, is the proverbial "little that contains a lot." Within it lies the entire unfolding of existence, every stage in the evolutionary journey, every plant and animal as it will live, reproduce (or not), and die, all of humanity and all that lies beyond us in the distant future. All this exists in a literal sense *of potential* (meaning that its potency, its power, is all fully present) in that primal point. In our contemporary language, that point is the instant of the Big Bang, the moment that contains the energy of existence in all its intensity. From there it flows forward into existence, garbing or "actualizing" itself at each stage in endless forms of existence.

To say this in another way, also derived from Kabbalistic language, I am depicting the entire course of evolution as the infinitely varied self-garbing of an endless energy flow. All being exists in an eternal dialectic of *hitpashtut*, the emanatory flowing forth of that single energy, and *hitlabbeshut*, the garbing of that energy in distinctive forms. But now we add an important post-Darwinian caveat to that mystical view of existence. The only means this One has in this process of self-manifestation are those of natural selection and its resulting patterns of change and growth. It *is* nature (yes, "nature" could be another name for that which I have called "God," "the One," and "Being" as long as its "supernatural" or miraculous dimensions are included). Hence the length and slowness of the journey. But precisely in this lies the utterly marvelous nature of what has come forth, step after single step. To see that process with the eye of wonder is the starting point of religious awareness.

As more highly developed forms of animal life emerge, the forward movement of natural selection takes place partly in the form of aggression and competition, each creature and species grasping at its chance to survive and prosper. The competition for food and other resources, the devices created by males and females of various species to attract mates and reproduce, the struggle to find and eat one's prey rather than be consumed by one's predators, are all essential parts of the story—indeed, *our* story. This is an aspect of our biological legacy that we need to own and confront. We cannot understand our own human nature without taking into account the fierce struggle we underwent to arrive, and to achieve the dominance we have over this planet, for better and worse. But that same mysterious inner process also brings about more cooperative forms of societal organization, in which such creatures as ants, bees, and humans learn to work together toward fulfilling their species' goals. All of this is part of our biological legacy. Indeed, it is in grasping how these two trends, the competitive and the collaborative, combine and interact that we come to understand how our species survives. This should be a source of significant insight into the human condition. Once we achieve this understanding, we can make the value decisions as to which aspects of that biological heritage we want to take the lead as we proceed with our lives, both as individuals and as a species.

But it would also be disingenuous of me as a human to say that the emergence of human consciousness, even the ability to be thinking and writing about these very matters, is nothing more than a small series of steps in the unfolding linear process wrought by natural selection. That is indeed *how* we came about. But there is a different *meaning* to human existence that cannot be denied. The self-reflective consciousness of humans, combined with our ability to take a long biohistorical view of the whole unfolding that lies behind (and ahead of) us, makes a difference. All creatures are doing the "work of God" by existing, feeding, reproducing, and moving the evolutionary process forward. But we humans, especially today, are called upon to do that work in a different way. We have emerged as partners of the One in the survival and maintenance of this planet and all the precious attainments that have evolved here. Without our help, it will not continue to thrive. Being has thus turned a corner, or come back in a self-reflexive circle, as it manifests itself in the human mind.

The Call to Adam

In the long march toward increased complexity and ability of species, the emergence of the human brain is an important and transformative moment. We humans represent a significant step forward in the evolutionary path toward the self-articulation and self-fulfillment of that One. If the purpose of the journey is one of manifestation or becoming known, the development of our powers of reflective conciousness are surely key. But I do not view us humans—surely not as we are now—as the end or purpose of evolution. We, like all other species, are a step along the way. If existence survives on this planet, Mind will one day be manifest to a degree far beyond our present ability to comprehend or predict. On *that* day, says Scripture, "Earth will be filled with knowledge of Y-H-W-H as water fills the sea" (Is. 11:9)—just that wholly and naturally.

Because we humans represent a new and important step in this journey, the One manifest within us calls out to us in a particular human way. It addresses each of us with something more than the cry "Survive!" that is its instinct-borne call to every creature. We children of Adam (that's how you say "humans" in Hebrew, and note that here the language itself leads me to migrate farther into the realm of myth) are addressed with the word the God of Genesis used to call out to the first human: "*Ayekah?*"—"Where are you?"[19] The indwelling One asks this of every person, of every human embodiment of its own single Self. This question means "Where are you in helping Me to carry this project forward?" Are you extending My work of self-manifestation, participating as you should in the ongoing evolutionary process, the eternal reaching toward knowing and fulfilling the One that is all of life's goal? That is why you are here, tumbling and stumbling forward from one generation to the next! *What are you doing about it?*

"Where are you?" calls out to us in three distinctly human dimensions. The first of these is mental or intellectual: "Are you stretching your mind to move forward, to carry on the evolutionary process in the realm of understanding, as we think in ever more sophisticated and refined ways about the nature of existence and its unity?" Evolution does not end with the emergence of humanity. The process continues unabated, reflected in the growth of societies and civilizations over the millennia. The imperative

[19] See Gen. 3:9. I have in mind also the Hasidic tale of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi's use of this verse in confronting his jailer in St. Petersburg. See especially Martin Buber's retelling of that tale in *The Way of Man* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1966), pp. 9ff.

to stretch the mind includes scientific thought, the ongoing attempt to understand and unpack the mysteries of our universe. But it also embraces the humanities and the arts, the expanding of human consciousness in more subtle ways. Some of the highest manifestation of this ongoing evolutionary process are to be found in our ideas and images of God, as we move from primitive tribal gods and local nature deities through classical polytheism (the pantheon of gods), on to primitive monolatry (there is but one god worthy of worship), into true universal monotheism, and then toward greater abstraction and depth of thought. All of these are stages on the road toward that total comprehension of Being in its oneness that lies somewhere in our future. We will trace some of this process, as seen through a Jewish lens, in the following pages.[19a] In our own day this quest takes place both in the scientific community, in the search for a contemporary understanding of the life-force or a unified field theory, and in the growing interest in monistic philosophies, including those rooted in Vedanta or Buddhism, that have begun to take root in the postmodern West. "Where are you?" Are you stretching your mind to its fullest to know the One?

The second way in which this "Where are you?" calls out to us involves a stretching of the human heart to become more open, more aware. If you believe as I do that the presence of God is everywhere, our chief task is that of becoming aware. But that job is not only an intellectual one; it involves heart as well as mind. God is everywhere, but we build walls around ourselves, emotional walls, barricades of defensiveness, because we are too threatened by the oneness of Being to let ourselves be open to it, "Where are you?" demands of us a greater openness to our own vulnerability and dependence on forces beyond ourselves than our frail ego is willing to accept. The walls behind which we barricade ourselves are the illusions of our strength and individual immortality, the sense that there is nothing more important than our own egos and the superficial pursuits toward which most of our lives have somehow become devoted. Liberation into the life of the spirit means doing the hard work of breaking through those self-created protections and coming face to face with the ultimate frailty of our lives and the great religious question that hovers over us. Only as we face this challenge do we begin to let go of that which separates us from the totality of Being or the all-embracing presence of the One. The spiritual work that each of us has to do consists primarily of letting go, allowing that

[19a] See Radical Judaism, chapter 2.

presence to enter our consciousness and transform us. In the course of this process we enable ourselves to become *givers* or fonts of blessing in the grand economy of existence, rather than *consumers* who simply take all for ourselves without giving back to life.[20] "Where are you?" Are you stretching your heart to open as widely as it can?

The third area in which "Where are you?" calls upon us is that of the human deed. It is not enough to reach forth with mind and heart; these alone will not transform the world. *Every* human being is the image of God. Every creature and every life form is a garbing of divine presence. The way in which we treat them and relate to them is the ultimate testing ground of our own religious consciousness. The One seeks to be known and loved in each of its endless unique manifestations. The purpose of our growing awareness is to reach out and appreciate all things for what they really are. This is especially true with regard to our fellow humans. That every human being is the image of God is Judaism's most basic moral truth. We need to help all humans to discover this dimension of their own existence in whatever terms they may choose to articulate it. We recognize that this truth may be depicted differently in the varied religious and secular languages of human culture. We do not require others to accept the language of Judaism, but we do see justice, decency, and civility to one another as universal human imperatives that stem directly from the reality that we call *tselem elohim*, the image of God. A person cannot be expected to discover the image of God within himself or herself as long as he or she is hungry, or as long as he or she is homeless or degraded by poverty, addictions, or the seemingly overwhelming burdens of everyday life. Our task has to be to lessen and lighten those burdens as ways of helping all to see the radiant presence that surrounds us and fills us in each moment. In the realm of "heart" it was illusory walls we had to remove in order to see that light. But in the realm of "deed" the forces that block out the light are quite concrete—social, political, or economic barriers—and they too have to become the object of our attention as people and communities of faith. "Where are you?" Are you engaged in the work given to you by the call of God?

All of these aspects of the call are the stuff of Jewish moral theology. In a sense I am commenting here on the opening teaching of the Talmud, the great treasury of rabbinic law and wisdom. Although the Talmud seems to begin with discussion of prayer and its proper hour, buried within it lies a

[20] This is the key theme in the voluminous writings of Rabbi Yehudah Ashlag (1886–1955), the leading Kabbalistic figure of the early twentieth century. This interesting author has much to teach, though his legacy has been distorted in various popular presentations.

little treatise called *Avot* (Principles), an eternal favorite of Jewish moral teachers. This tractate was meant to serve as an introduction to the Talmud (or perhaps as a concluding summation). Hence it begins with a superscription, telling us whence authority for the Law is derived: "Moses received Torah from Sinai and gave it to Joshua, who gave it to the judges, who gave it to the prophets, who gave it to the elders," and so forth. But then the first teaching is stated: "*The world stands upon three things: on Torah* (teaching, wisdom, the cultivation of awareness), *on Worship* (the struggle to open the heart), *and on Deeds of Kindness* (the active transformation of the world; the bringing about of 'God's kingdom')."

Because I take this call seriously, when I read the old rabbinic dicta[21] that say "God looked at the righteous" or "Israel arose in God's mind" and "For their sake God created the world," I surprisingly find myself to be among the affirmers. Of course I don't read these words literally, thinking of a Roman emperor or a Near Eastern potentate who calls in his advisers and asks, "Should I create humans?" But I do agree that there is a purpose to human existence, and that is what these statements really mean. Reading these ancient words for our day we also understand that "Israel" as generally understood is far too narrow and chauvinistic a term in this context and that even "the righteous" sounds rather smug and elitist. I by no means think that God created the world for the sake of the Jews or the pious Jews or anything like that. I need to universalize the "Israel" of this sentence (and so many others!) to include all those who struggle with God, referring back to the original etymology of that name.[22] "The righteous" here has to include all those who do the work of stretching toward the One, by whatever means and methods they employ. I affirm this universalizing of the rabbis' teaching to be in accord with the often ignored truth that lies at Judaism's core, rooted in the assertion that all humans are descended from the same parents, those of whom God says: "Let us make humans in our image."[23] The reality of that One is manifest across the great and diverse spectrum of our shared humanity.

[21] Bereshit Rabbah 1:4; 8:7.

[22] See Gen. 32:28 and commentaries and discussion in *Radical Judaism*, chapter 4.

[23] Key to my theological-moral position is R. Simeon ben Azzai's preference for Gen. 5:1–2 (creation of all humans in God's image) over R. Akiva's choice of Lev. 19:18 ("Love your neighbor as yourself") as the *kelal gadol*, the most basic rule of Torah. Talmud Yerushalmi Nedarim 9:4 (41c). Everything else, in both *halakhah* and *aggadah*, needs to conform with this. When it does not, it needs to be reexamined. Yes, one may call this an "essentialist" approach to Jewish ethics, but it is one rooted in the rabbinic sources themselves.

In asserting that humans are "called" in a distinctive way by the One that dwells within us, I also realize that I am making a claim for our species that sounds as though we are the apex or final goal of this ongoing self-disclosing process that takes place within all creatures. Far from it! I do believe that there is an inbuilt drive toward greater complexity and higher forms of consciousness, in which the emergence of the human brain is a most significant step.[24] But again I want to acknowledge that the ultimate stages of this process lie far, far beyond us, as far beyond our awareness and sensitivities as our mind is from those forms of life we consider much simpler and more "primitive." Living as we do at the dawn of a new age, one in which the human mind will be augmented and challenged by our *golem* of "artificial intelligence," we can hardly imagine the new heights and depths that understandings of reality will attain, even in a relatively short expanse of time. As we unravel the genome and the mysteries of DNA, the truth that each of us bears within us the memory of all earlier generations—indeed, of the whole evolutionary process—becomes ever clearer. What will it take to convert that understanding into *conscious* memory, and how greatly will that add to our appreciation of who we are and the journey on which we have come?

Within the few millennia that we call human history, the tiny tip of evolution's timeline that we can reconstruct from the remains of human civilization, the evolutionary process continues unabated, manifest in the evolving human brain but also in the societies and civilizations that result from it. Within this ongoing process, a special place belongs to the evolution of religion, as ideas, images, and conceptions of the gods, God, the life-force, or the essence of Being grow and change with the times. This evolutionary approach to the history of religion forms the background for the next section of this book, my treatment of our Jewish and Western views of God, which I seek to address in the combined roles of scholar and seeker. I do this out of conviction that the evolution of species and the evolution of religious ideas, or of our understanding of reality, are continuous parts of a single evolutionary process. I ultimately suggest that the emergence of an explicitly pantheistic or panentheistic theology in our day is a natural result of this complex evolution, some key steps of which I hope to trace in the following pages. The journey from the tribal warrior god and the projected

[24] But I am interested in, and think we need to learn more about, the intelligence and communication skills of elephants, whales, primates, and others. We are told that King Solomon knew how to listen to and speak with animals. We will not reach his wisdom until we relearn this lost skill, among many others.

superhero to the unitive face of Being is indeed a long one, and one in which prior steps are never quite entirely left behind. Because of this, any current discussion of God, particularly in the context of a tradition as ancient as Judaism, is freighted with images, liturgical memories, and literary tropes from each stage along the way.

I have been making a transition here from God to "God" in a multilayered way. I began by talking about reality as I understand it, about the existence of a unifying single Being, a constant within all change, that which undergoes the astro-, geo-, and biohistory of our universe and planet. I then immediately complicated matters by referring to that constant as "God," an English term derived from ancient Teutonic mythology but for many centuries also used to designate other deities as well, including the One who is the chief subject of the Hebrew Bible, and thus of Jewish and Christian faith. I use this term even though I mean it in a way that is quite different from that meant by most Jews and Christians, since I say quite openly that I choose it *in order to* personify this underlying singularity of being. As "the One" becomes personal, "being" (HWYH in Hebrew) becomes "God" (Y-H-W-H). That which I designate as "the One" remains beyond naming; it is none other than transcendent mystery. My act of naming, my insistence on speaking of (and to) the core of scientific reality in a religious manner is intended as an act of mythopoetic transformation, a remythologization of the cosmos for our postmodern age. In order to understand the context in which I am doing this, we need to know a good deal more about the Western use of the word "God" and its history.