

*We happily join with all others who seek, each in our own way, to realize these sacred truths, while admitting in collective humility that none of our languages embodies truth in its fullness.*

We especially welcome shared efforts in the realm of action. We seek to join with other people of faith and goodwill to reshape our society into one less based on greed and competition and more on human goodness, and to engage in the most urgent task of our generation, that of protecting life on our beloved and much-threatened planet.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> I am grateful to my students Ebn Leader, Ariel Mayse, and Or Rose for important contributions to this essay. I shared the credo with participants in a conference on Jewish theology at Hebrew College in the fall of 2011. I am grateful for their input as well.

INTERVIEW WITH ARTHUR GREEN  
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Professor Green, we are very grateful to you for agreeing to be included in the Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers. Please tell us a little bit about yourself. Where did you grow up, and what kind of Jewish upbringing did you have?

I grew up in Newark, New Jersey. I was born in 1941, so I grew up in the immediate postwar years. I'm a third generation American Jew. My grandparents were all immigrants. My parents were both born in the United States right after their parents' immigration.

My home was very secular. My father was a militant atheist. His parents had already become atheists in the old country. They were children of Hasidim who moved from the shtetl to Łódź and there joined the Jewish workers' movement. My father's aunts and uncles on his mother's side were mostly Communist party members. My father's parents were not Communists, but shared their negative view of religion.

When I decided to become a rabbi, my father's mother wrote me a letter in her night school English, all in one sentence, that began like this: "Dear Arthur, I hear you still want to be a rabbi I would be prouder of you if you would be a teacher and teach people things that are true because if there was a God in the sky he would have been shot down by Sputnik already." Period. So that was my father's family.

My mother's family was more traditional, but not Orthodox. My grandfather's tailor shop was open on Shabbat, but the home was kosher and certain things weren't done in the home on Shabbat. And once my grandfather retired, he started going to shul every Shabbat and then every day. He may have been going as much for the schnapps and herring as for the davening. Really it was to be among what he would have called *hey mishe menschen*, people from back home. He and his wife were very much traditional East-European Jews. My mothers' parents were very important to me. My mother died when I was eleven years old. I was partly brought up by my grandparents after that. I spent many Shabbatot and holidays in their home and got to know their world quite well. What happened was that my mother died and then her only brother died just two years later. My grandparents were devastated and I was the grandchild attracted both to Judaism and to

old people. I was therefore sent to make my grandparents feel better. As a result, I spent a lot of time with them and was quite under their influence.

I was attracted to the old world of Eastern Europe from childhood on. I learned Yiddish as a child. I heard my grandparents speak it and I studied German in high school in order to learn Yiddish. I was given a Jewish education as a concession to my grandparents. Each boy in the family was required to have a bar mitzvah. My sister, on the other hand, got no Jewish education at all. I recall that my father took me aside when I was eight years old and said, "You have to do this terrible thing called Hebrew school. And if you hate it, you may quit." Contrary to his expectation, I apparently loved it.

Perhaps I loved Hebrew school as a sort of rebellion against my father. I am one of the rare success stories of the American afternoon Hebrew school system. It was a very progressive school. The rabbi of the synagogue was Joachim Prinz from Berlin, a very famous liberal thinker and a Labor Zionist. I started Hebrew school, I guess, in 1949 and became serious about learning Hebrew a year later. By the time I was ten years old, I had a pen pal in Pardes Chanah in Israel, where my teacher had once lived, and was writing letters and bits of Hebrew. And I fell in love with Hebrew. It was partly the language that I fell in love with and partly the culture that went with it, to be sure. But even at a young age, it was the religious life as well. My father considered it an odd puzzle that his son should be attracted to religion. Eventually it became an embarrassment to him.

I moved toward a higher degree of religious observance that was on the edge of Orthodoxy, I would say (although my links were all within the Conservative movement), by the time I was an adolescent. I got into terrible fights with my father, who became quite passionate in his dislike of religion, blaming his in-laws for having taken me from the intellectual and forward-looking world in which he had raised me and trapping me in this arcane way of living. That became a subject of great conflict in our family. When I was twelve years old, a good Hebrew teacher of mine saw an opportunity to get me to go to Camp Ramah. When I was fifteen and sixteen, I spent two very significant summers in Camp Ramah in the Poconos as an adolescent.

**Camp Ramah is affiliated with Conservative Judaism. Is that how you became associated with Conservative Judaism?**

Yes indeed. Camp Ramah belonged to Conservative Judaism. My Hebrew teacher from Newark, Aryeh Rohn, was head counselor there. That is how

the connection was made. I was very fortunate to have wonderful teachers at Camp Ramah. The first year at Ramah my teacher was Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi, the great Jewish historian, and in the second year my teacher was Gershon Cohen, another great Jewish historian who would become the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

**Well, you were quite lucky to be exposed to these great Jewish teachers.**

At Camp Ramah my experience was quite different from that of most other campers. The teachers saw that I was serious. My Hebrew had become quite good, but I had never opened the Talmud (our liberal and Zionist Hebrew School emphasized Bible study), so the camp librarian took me aside and taught me how to read a Talmudic text in Aramaic. His name was David Weiss Halivni. He would become one of the most important scholars of rabbinic literature in the twentieth century. As of this date, he is the last of my living teachers.

**Well, this is quite an impressive roster of teachers.**

Indeed, Camp Ramah in the late 1940s and 1950s offered a superb Jewish education, which I was fortunate to receive. Of course, this was on so much higher a level than my secular public school high school that I was attracted to the study of Judaism, because it consisted of more challenging, interesting ideas. I read Heschel's *God in Search of Man* and *The Sabbath* when I was fifteen. And I fell in love with Heschel and with ideas he presented so passionately. The first whole Hebrew book I read after textbooks was Agnon's novella *Bi-levav Yamim* (In the Heart of the Seas) when I was sixteen. I fell in love with it and the kind of romantic Zionist fantasy represented in the book. So in my high school years I was very much imbued with that world of romantic piety characteristic of the writings of Heschel and Agnon. But I was also quite bound by fairly compulsive patterns of religious observance, tied to a great sense of guilt and unresolved issues around my mother's death and our deepening family conflicts. At the age of sixteen years old I enrolled at Brandeis University and was happy to leave my father's home.

**How come you finished high school so early?**

Well, in Newark, New Jersey, in those days, if you were a little bit smarter than the average kid, they didn't know what to do with you, so they made

you skip a class because intellectually you were ready to handle the material of the higher grade.

In terms of social development, it was not a very clever thing to do, but they were not aware of it at the time. So I started Brandeis when I was sixteen, still in this Orthodox phase. At Brandeis we had a very successful young Hillel director, who was very dynamic but who only lasted one year at Brandeis. His name was Yitz Greenberg, another great person who would exercise deep influence on American Jewry. He was a big influence on my life during that freshman year.

**Could you please explain why you choose to go to Brandeis? Why did you not apply to a secular university, whether public or private?**

Ah, but Brandeis did see itself very much as a secular university! I wanted a good Jewish education along with my college education. My father did not want it, but I knew that I had to get away from home because things were rather tense there, although I will spare the details. I was going away to college and I applied to four schools: Columbia University, University of Pennsylvania, Johns Hopkins, and Brandeis University.

**What about the Jewish population in those schools in the mid-1950s?**

As for Columbia, my father didn't want me to go there because it was too close to Jewish Theological Seminary and he already saw the influence of JTS on me which he didn't like. I chose University of Pennsylvania and Johns Hopkins because they had Jewish studies programs, but my father didn't know that. I went to Brandeis because they offered me a scholarship. The tuition was \$2,000 and I got a \$1,000 scholarship, so it made Brandeis very affordable, which convinced my father to send me to Brandeis, even though it was a Jewish institution.

You have to understand that Brandeis had a very good reputation, and my father, who was an intellectual, was impressed by my ability to get into Brandeis. He was a high school history teacher in a very fine public high school in Newark, Weequahic High School, where all the Jewish kids went. It's the school that Philip Roth writes about. My father (he had an M.A. in history from NYU) understood and appreciated colleges that were intellectually demanding; Brandeis had a good reputation among people like him. They all knew that faculty at Brandeis included people like Max Lerner, Irving Howe, and Marie Syrkin, and other liberal Jewish intellectuals. My father had no idea that Brandeis also had a strong Judaica department, but

I knew that fact, and thus Brandeis was a respectable place to go as far as my father was concerned and a very attractive place for me as well.

So I got to Brandeis, still in this period of piety. During my freshman year, Yitz Greenberg invited a colleague of his from Hillel, a dynamic young Lubavitcher Hasid named Zalman Schachter, to come to a weekend at Brandeis. That's how I met Zalman, who was an important mentor in my life, intellectually, religiously, and spiritually, as well as a dear friend, for over half a century.

**So your upbringing was a kind of "Who's Who" in American Jewish life, because you were taught by people that shaped American Jewish culture. Right?**

In some ways, I see myself as an American Jewish young person who was exactly at the right age to gain maximum benefit from the émigré intellectuals whom Hitler had cast up on our shores. As a child my rabbi was Joachim Prinz from Berlin. When I became too traditional for him, I went to the synagogue of Max Gruenwald in Milburn, New Jersey, who was the rabbi from Mannheim. At Brandeis I studied with Nahum Glatzer and Alexander Altmann as well as with Herbert Marcuse and Aaron Gurevitch in the Philosophy Department, all of them German-educated. At Brandeis I received the best Middle European education one could get in America in the postwar years.

**You were very lucky to have that wonderful intellectual experience.**

Intellectually, I was attracted to continental philosophy rather than to American philosophy, which by comparison seemed to us something shallow and irrelevant, easily to be dismissed.

**Do you refer to analytic philosophy, that is, to the Anglo-American analytic tradition?**

Yes, that's right. At Brandeis the study of continental philosophy meant that we had to deal with Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche, whom I read in six different courses. Of the European thinkers it was the existentialists who really spoke to me. What I remember most of Marcuse's course on the post-Hegelian reaction was how much he despised Kierkegaard. But being a religious person, I in fact was attracted to Kierkegaard and found his ideas to be profound and meaningful. And so all of that

philosophical training was just part of my education as an undergraduate student.

After Brandeis I went to the Jewish Theological Seminary for rabbinic school. At JTS I studied with Heschel, yet another East European Jew who was educated in Germany. This educational experience explains why I have come to feel myself an heir of that generation. When I edited my collection of essays called *Jewish Spirituality*, I dedicated the two volumes to our teachers of that generation. And I somehow see a lot of my work as conveying their intellectual seriousness to the next generations of students who no longer have the privilege of knowing those people and their world.

**At Brandeis were you aware of the difference between Altmann and Glatzer? Did your teachers appear to you as the same kind of people or did you recognize how they differed as teachers and as educators?**

Oh, they differed significantly.

**Okay, in what way?**

They both had a rather strongly Germanic "Herr Professor" bearing, somewhat intimidating to undergraduates. But Glatzer, remember, was the very close disciple of Franz Rosenzweig and had been one of the key young teachers in the Lehrhaus. At Brandeis he taught very much in the academic mode, but you always had a sense that the texts were personally important to him as well. Exposing people to texts was something Glatzer cared tremendously about; much of his career was devoted to editing and translation of sources. Glatzer believed that you should let the students make what they want of the text. Your obligation as a scholar is to make the texts available so people can read them, but then to stand aside. I absorbed that approach so that my very first published work, an anthology of Hasidic teachings on prayer, was modeled on Glatzer's anthologies.

**How critical was Glatzer? Was he able to subject the sources that he loved to critical analysis?**

Glatzer was a well-trained critical scholar, but also a person with broad interests. Once his position was secure, he wrote and taught on what interested him. So he was an expert on Job and on Kafka because they were what mattered to him existentially, and on Rosenzweig, his admired teacher. I must say that Altmann saw Glatzer as less dedicated to pure

scholarship than he, Altmann, was. Altmann was very much a scholar's scholar, and his reputation far exceeded Glatzer's.

**Altmann represented and was the best example of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* tradition, namely, the academic study of Judaism.**

Yes. Altmann was very much of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* tradition, although, he was also personally touched by the material. Let me tell you a story about Altmann to illustrate the kind of person he was. Altmann came to Brandeis in 1959 for a trial visiting semester. And then he was appointed in 1960. In 1960, he taught the first class on Jewish mysticism ever taught in an American university and I was a student in that class. But in 1959 he came in and taught a course called Classical Jewish Thought. It covered the ideas of God, Creation, Revelation, and Redemption in Judaism from the Bible through the Kabbalah. And Altmann was a master of this vast tradition from biblical, through rabbinic, to philosophical and kabbalistic texts; he knew them all. Keep in mind that Altmann published first-rate original academic scholarship on everything from Philo to Rosenzweig. He had a tremendous knowledge, which is very rare today. Today, you couldn't publish as widely as Altmann did because you'd be called dilettante if you did. But in those days, you could master the whole field of Jewish thought. Well, all semester, Altmann taught without a *kippah*, even though prior to coming to Brandeis, Altmann worked as an Orthodox rabbi in England. But at Brandeis he taught with his head uncovered. One day at the end of the first section of the class, I see him pace over to the door of the classroom (a frosted glass door with a little diamond of clear glass in the middle), peer out the window, quickly slip a *kippah* onto his head and read a passage from the Zohar.

The point of the story is that Altmann could read everything, including the *Tanakh*, without his head covered, but when it came to the Zohar, he just couldn't make himself do it. And that taught me, more than anything else, what a holy book the Zohar was. For a kid in the class to notice that act made it memorable; I never forgot it because it conveyed Altmann's deep reverence toward the material he taught with presumed scholarly objectivity.

**At Brandeis were you exposed to the discipline of religious studies?**

Altmann exposed me to it and got me to read Rudolph Otto, as well as Mircea Eliade along with some of the Jungians. Altmann was very interested

I would translate it into English, which I did only fifty years later when I published a little volume of Zeitlin's writings in English. And I just knew after reading that essay, and after taking Altmann's course on Kabbalah, that this was what I would pursue. It was both a personal and an academic commitment at once. The study of Kabbalah was already recognized as an academic field and Altmann was the model of the academic scholar for me. But Altmann was also, as I stated already, a committed person who was personally involved with the material he studied. In oral presentations to popular audiences or among friends, Altmann was not afraid to share his emotional stance, and he showed me how you could be a scholar and a religious person at the same time. So the choice of Kabbalah and Hasidism as my life's trajectory was both personal and academic. I did not distinguish between those two aspects and did not see a conflict between them.

By the time I graduated college, I knew that I was going to be a Jewish scholar specializing in Kabbalah. When I was a senior in college I read Hasidic books, and I remember buying my copy of *Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov* in 1960 (a collection of early Hasidic teachings), a year before I graduated from Brandeis in 1961. I had a habit of writing the dates of purchase in the books I bought, so I can document my entry into the world of Kabbalah and Hasidism pretty accurately.

**So, you came into your own intellectually during the sixties right?**

Yes.

**But you discovered your spiritual path in the beginning of the sixties rather than at the end of the sixties, when America was awash with the pursuit of spirituality.**

Yes.

**So, how did the culture of the sixties shape your identity?**

I was a pre-1960s sixties person in some ways. The famous sixties culture really came into bloom only several years later. Now Brandeis was a pretty precocious place. I still remember my senior year during which there was a party at a friend of mine's house, where Norman Mailer spoke and he passed around a joint. And a friend of mine tried it but I was too afraid. This was the first time we saw marijuana. That was 1960. Let me tell the

story chronologically and then I'll come back to the question. So, I graduated college in 1961. I went off to Jerusalem for a year. I'd not been to Israel before. I came to Jerusalem and sat in on Gershom Scholem's lectures and I took a Zohar reading course with Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, who specialized in Kabbalah and Hasidism.

**Did these scholars of Kabbalah introduce you to a new way of approaching the material, or were they but an Israeli version of Altmann?**

They were much more than an Israeli version of Altmann. Even though the methodology and academic approach were essentially the same, the level of the courses, all in Hebrew, was much higher and more intellectually demanding.

**Given your intellectual and spiritual trajectory, did you not feel turned off by the learning at the Hebrew University? Since you already made your personal commitment to Kabbalah and Hasidism, didn't the Hebrew University feel like you were going backward rather than forward?**

No, "personal commitment" did not mean that I was becoming either a kabbalist or a Hasid. I hadn't made the switch away from academic interest. I still wanted to be an academic. Also do not forget that I'm an American, so the skill necessary to reading an Aramaic text (which is what the Zohar is) was something brand new to me and presented a challenge. To learn how to read the Zohar was a valuable experience.

**Yes, I agree with you since I took that course a decade later.**

That year at the Hebrew University was very serious and intellectually demanding. It also represented a new kind of life for me, since I was economically on my own. (My father refused to support my year in Israel.) I had no money to support myself, so I got a job teaching English in an evening school for high school students who worked during the day and studied in the evening to prepare for the national matriculation exam. And the kids were all first-generation Jewish immigrants from Eastern countries such as Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Georgia, and various places in North Africa. They were great kids and I had a wonderful time teaching them English and through that experience I got to know Israel in deeper ways than just being a student at the Hebrew University. Teaching English

that year was a very important and formative experience for me, because I had to use my Hebrew to conduct a class in Hebrew and control the students. They were very impressed (as was I) that I could do that.

**Yes being able to teach in a foreign language is indeed a challenge, so if you managed to do it your knowledge of the language was of high level. At the end of that year did you go back to the United States?**

Yes, I had to go back to the U.S. because I had applied to Jewish Theological Seminary. I had applied to JTS because everybody said that to study Kabbalah, you need to know Talmud. And how can you learn Talmud if you are not going to join a yeshiva? JTS was the only possibility. The problem was that at JTS you had to sign a pledge saying you observed Shabbat, kashrut, and daily prayers. And I was not quite so much into religious observance in those days. I would go to shul and Shabbat was different from weekdays. In Jerusalem I frequented different kinds of synagogues and was exposed to various styles of prayer, but I was not really observant. And the question was, could I lie on the pledge or not?

So I wrote to the two rabbis I knew whom I considered most strongly ethical people and solicited their advice. One of them was Steven Schwarzschild, whom I knew because I had been director of the youth group at his synagogue in Massachusetts. Although he was a graduate of the Hebrew Union College, which is a Reform seminary, he had become quite Orthodox. And Schwarzschild said, "You must go to JTS. Go ahead and lie; it will be a mitzvah."

**That is quite surprising advice, coming from a moral philosopher of his stature.**

The other person I consulted was Joe Lukinsky, a young rabbi who was an educator in Boston (later a JTS faculty member). He also said, "It's a mitzvah to lie on that pledge. Besides," he said, "if you go to HUC, I'll kick your teeth in." Lukinsky was a pretty tough guy, so I followed their advice, lied on my application, and entered JTS. At JTS, I became sporadically more observant but never consistently so. I could never really go back to consistent observance. I had done it very compulsively when I was a teenager. Whenever I went back and became too fully observant, I felt those walls close in on me again and felt a lack of freedom. I then

needed to do something silly to violate the halakhah, to show that I was not really observant. This delayed adolescent rebellion went on for a great many years. Only recently can I say that I have overcome it and begun to live a consistently observant life again, one with which I am quite happy.

**So you were a kind of a rebel. Is that right?**

Yes, I remained a rebel and that is probably why I deeply identified with the protagonist of Camus's *The Rebel*, which was an important book to me. Given this inherent rebelliousness, I found it very hard to live within the norms of halakhah. Sometimes I found it attractive and wanted to do it, but one thing or another held me back. Modern Orthodoxy never attracted me at all. I found it too shallow, defensive, and rationalistic in its approach, and far too concerned with justifying its own halakhic status. But the vision of living in a Hasidic community did attract me. I remember when I was a student at JTS, I once visited the Bobover Rebbe in Brooklyn, because I had friends who lived in his community. He was a very beautiful man and teacher. I said to myself: "Wouldn't this be a wonderful life, to just join this community?" And then I heard the young people talking about "Goyim," and about nonobservant Jews, and that closed-mindedness made it clear to me that I could never belong in that community. I was still the son of a liberal thinker, a universalist, and it was just totally impossible for me to leave those values behind. A very lovely Chabadnik taught Tanya to a group of us JTS students. I loved the study, but could not see myself following him to Chabad.

So that was a door that was quite closed to me, but when I went back to the seminary I found many other students who were only partially observant. In our class in the seminary there were various forms of nonobservant conduct (such as smoking cigarettes on the Sabbath) as well as nonconventional and even illegal conduct (such as smoking marijuana, strictly forbidden even on weekdays).

**Things have changed at JTS since the sixties, I should say, but those days young people, including Jews, experimented with many other forms of nonconformist behavior.**

Yes, yes, yes. Those were heady days, but I was at the Seminary, as JTS is known, and this institution was deeply committed to Wissenschaft des

Judentums, in even more arid form than Brandeis. And indeed studying there was very different from the experience at Brandeis. We used to joke that the Seminary was on the Vilna–Berlin–New York Axis, because it couldn't decide if it was a Lithuanian yeshiva, a Wissenschaft Akademie in Berlin, or an American rabbinical training program. The problem is that I was not on that train, so to speak, because Hasidut had no place on the Vilna–Berlin–New York track. But Heschel didn't belong in the Seminary either, even though he was on the faculty. After one year, I was ready to leave the Seminary because I found the place overly repressive and juvenilizing. The people in charge realized I was ready to leave the Seminary and my Talmud teacher, Seymour Siegel, said to me, "If you had a private program of study with Professor Heschel, would you stay?" So they authorized a private program of study with Heschel for four years. I was released from many of the other courses and I just took courses in Bible and Talmud and worked with Heschel. That was my training program at JTS. I am very grateful to the Seminary for having given me that opportunity, even though I no longer revered his writing the way I had when I was a teenager. Once I became secular, I had become quite cynical about the beauty of Heschel's writing, but I still greatly respected him as a scholar and teacher. Years later I came to admire him again as a theologian, and I have been teaching him, especially his book *Heavenly Torah*, for many decades. I consider the years of study with Heschel to have been one of the great privileges of my life.

**And how much philosophy was involved in your training at JTS?**

In terms of formal philosophical discourse, the answer is not much, but in terms of conversation about philosophical matters, a great deal. Heschel often defended himself as a philosopher. He talked about the fact that people didn't consider him a philosopher and he did. He would discuss his attitude toward philosophy.

**Well, he definitely was a philosopher of religion.**

Yes, yes. I remember Heschel coming back from a lecture and saying to me, "A woman came up to me after the lecture and said, 'Professor Heschel, you speak so beautifully. Every word was a pearl.'" And he said, "You know, for a philosopher, that's a tragedy." He understood that sometimes his language was too beautiful and seductive, enabling his listeners

to avoid coming to terms with the ideas behind it. He was a serious person and very much a man of great ideas.

**So you're at JTS studying with Heschel. Who else shaped your intellectual identity in those days?**

Let me give a description of myself at JTS: I like to say that in my jeans that I wore in those days, I had a copy of Alan Ginsberg's "Howl" in one pocket and a copy of Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev in the other. And both books were equally unwelcome at JTS, because the institution was a very mitnagdic kind of place, namely it reflected the attitudes, style, and values of the rationalist opponents of Hasidism. Saul Lieberman and Louis Finkelstein, two great scholars of rabbinic Judaism, dominated the institution, and it was a very cerebral place. But I was different, since I was a seeker of the spiritual life that transcended cerebral rationalism, whether Talmudic or philosophic. Already by my third year at JTS, I had a little coterie of rabbinical students who were studying Hasidut with me. I was learning from Heschel and I was teaching a group of rabbinical students who were just slightly behind me in their studies.

**So you were channeling Heschel, so to speak?**

I was not just disseminating Heschel's ideas; I was actually doing my own teaching, and expressing my own ideas. I was also teaching in Hebrew high schools in those days and had some exceptionally bright and interesting students there. I have not told you that I did a great deal of work in teenage Jewish education in those years, both formal and informal.

The next thing to tell you about in the sequence of my intellectual and spiritual trajectory happened in 1965. I was teaching at Camp Ramah during the summer and there I had my first LSD trip. That was very important to me.

**How did you stay sane afterwards? Some people really don't do too well, you know.**

Well, here I am. I took LSD probably between five and ten times in the course of the next two years and I did see one person carried away in a straight-jacket because he had become terribly distraught.

**LSD is a powerful substance; one cannot dabble in it and avoid the damage it does to the brain.**

Yes, I agree. Perhaps that is why I have a damaged brain! But I seem to function quite decently with it. The panic about psychedelics was generated by governmental and other agencies in society that were terrified of their power. Although I have not used them in forty years, I continue to believe that with proper controls of set and setting, they can be a tremendous tool for the good. Taking LSD confirmed a lot of the things I had already seen on the pages of the Hasidic texts. It confirmed experientially for me things that I already knew from studying and being attracted to mysticism.

**Are you suggesting mystical experiences are based on the use of certain substances?**

No, no, not at all. Zalman Schachter once asked Heschel about LSD and Heschel laughed and said, "I had it with my mother's milk in Warsaw." I am suggesting parallel processes within the brain that are called upon in both mystical and psychedelic experiences.

**We know that Hasidism encouraged the use of wine and hard drinks in order to facilitate altered state of consciousness. So in this regard, Heschel's answer makes sense, but that is different from experimenting with LSD.**

Yes, in many Hasidic courts there was ample use of vodka, but he didn't mean that. I think that many mystics in Judaism and other religious traditions have achieved altered state of consciousness without using such substances.

**In the sixties famous academics experimented with LSD as well as with mysticism. Ram Dass, a Jewish man originally named Richard Alpert, is one well-known example, but there are others as well.**

Yes, indeed. Why did I take LSD at Ramah in 1965? Because the person in charge of waterfront at the camp, my very good friend David Mendelson, of blessed memory, was a junior at Harvard, and he was taking the class with Alpert and Leary where he was introduced to hallucinatory drugs, since they were giving LSD to their students at Harvard!

This was early in the countercultural revolution of the 1960s, but it was taking place at the very center of the academic establishment. Let me tell you how this drug culture took place. A woman named Lisa Biberman who lived on Harvard Square would sell you little sugar cubes wrapped up in tinfoil. And it was good stuff, acid manufactured by Sandoz in Switzerland, so you knew it was the best. But the experimentation with drugs then took place before this phenomenon went crazy and started to corrode many aspects of American social and cultural life. Zalman had taken LSD the year before in 1964 with Tim Leary. And so when I discovered LSD, and I was much involved in studying Hasidut, Zalman and I began a very intensive correspondence, in which we would each point out particular Hasidic texts and try to elucidate the experience behind them. I suspect we were the only two people at that time who had delved into Hasidut as well as psychedelics. It was a very important couple of years not just for me but also for Zalman, since it gave rise to his New Age Judaism and his advocacy of the Aquarian spirit. I was more conservative in my views of the world and did not go as far as Zalman went. I thought the world was not changing so fast, and the Messianic Age was not about to dawn. By contrast, Zalman thought everybody would soon take LSD and then we'd have new consciousness in the world and our social problems would disappear. Zalman maintained that we should all become licensed LSD practitioners so we could give it out to people. I was not ready to go that far, but experimenting with drugs was an important and positive experience for me and I don't hide it. It's not what set me on my spiritual path, since I had been already on the path for several years, but it was an important breakthrough for me. I consider drug taking helpful and under the right circumstances, I think it can be valuable.

**Your experimentation with drugs took place while you were still at JTS. Were you ordained as Conservative Rabbi?**

Even in my last year at JTS, I did not very much believe in the Conservative Jewish enterprise. I used to ask my friends in rabbinical school, "Whom are we kidding? We are not really halakhic Jews. We are traditional Jews with a certain aesthetic. But we don't do these things because they are commanded by God and therefore are legally binding. I mean, who here has his clothes checked for *shatnez*? Nobody! And how many wives of students at JTS actually go to the *mikveh*?" (Nowadays more do, but in those days, there were only one or two such persons, I think.) In terms of religious observance the level among JTS rabbinic students was relatively low. As I saw it, we choose certain things because we find them



spiritually meaningful and that's why we do them. Already then it was quite clear that my Judaism was about spiritual quest, not about normative conformity. And there were so many people at the Seminary who were really obsessed trying to identify the correct way of certain, though not all, religious observances. "Can you eat fish grilled in a restaurant? Do you have to grill it on tinfoil?" We had so many conversations about eating fish out that it drove me crazy. Gershom Scholem once said he had no patience for what he called "kitchen Judaism," and I fully concurred. While Heschel was quite fully observant, I also shared my impatience with halakhic small-mindedness with him, and he did not disagree. I remember Heschel said once, "How many *she'elot* (rabbinic queries) are there about whether you may open the refrigerator on Shabbat, and how many about whether you may fight in a nuclear war?" The concern for correct religious observance can become rather petty so that religious life is no longer the spiritual adventure it is supposed to be. So at JTS it became clear to me that I really did not fit into the mold of Conservative Judaism, particularly as it opted ever more for a halakhic self-definition.

**Did you experience any tension between scholarship and experience at that time, or was it a nonissue for you?**

I don't think it was much of an issue. Because for me they were part of the same adventure, both intellectual and spiritual. At that time I was discovering the *Merkava* texts of the ancient Jewish mystics and finding them very interesting. (We studied the Tractate *Hagigah* during my first year at JTS, where much of the mystical material is found.) I got my copy of *Merkava Shelemah* and began translating some of the texts into English and teaching them. Although I didn't have *Merkava* visions, there was something very inspiring about the spiritual journeys described in the texts which had a certain urgency and power. A person who had tried LSD had a certain access to the inner reality of such experiences. So the scholarship and the experience somehow went hand in hand for me.

During my years at Brandeis, and especially JTS, I was also something of a political activist. At Brandeis I had joined in early sit-ins for racial integration; I attended one or more marches in Washington. In about 1965, I became active in the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, the earliest phase of the Soviet Jewry movement. I finished my training at JTS in 1967 and during my last semester the world was facing another turmoil: the war in Vietnam. It was Heschel actually who introduced me and my fellow students to the antiwar movement. One night that year, we walked into Heschel's seminar

and there was a fellow sitting there we'd never seen before, wearing a turtle-neck shirt. Heschel says, "This is my friend, Dan Berrigan," a name we all knew. Father Dan Berrigan and Heschel were the co-chairs of what was called Clergy Concerned about Vietnam. Heschel went on to say: "Father Berrigan is here to convince me to go to jail with him. [They were throwing blood on draft files, which was a criminal offense.] Your assignment tonight is to decide whether I should go to jail or not." This remarkable statement launched a very interesting conversation which was not merely theoretical. Heschel just had his first heart attack and looked very frail, and we were much concerned about his health and very protective of him. So, we counseled him "Don't go to jail," and the debate ensued whether he could be more influential in jail or out of jail and what the morally right action is. Of course, the famous interchange between Emerson and Thoreau was on our minds. Heschel then turned to Berrigan and said, "Tell us what's happening in the Catholic Church?" And Berrigan gave a very 1960s, post-Vatican II radical theology and dreams of what Catholicism could become. None of us had heard anything like that before. Berrigan imagined that the parish churches would break up, mostly for lack of priests, that they'd be replaced by quasi-monastic communities of married people who would form the basis of a new Catholic community, that the Church would support radical Catholic workers, and so on.

Then Berrigan turned to us and asked: "Tell me what's happening in the Jewish community?" And I was terribly embarrassed, realizing that nothing like that was happening at all. The Jews were still very self-satisfied with erecting these big, empty buildings in the suburbs. Jewish education was in tatters, but nobody cared. Nobody goes to these synagogues, we all knew. It's all a lot of empty hypocrisy. Heschel knew it as well since he would often condemn American Jewish life as very shallow. At that very seminar I said to myself: "I'm going to create something different." I came out of that evening with Berrigan knowing that I wanted to build something different, a counter-synagogue of sorts, so that young people would have a new model that might attract them to Jewish life.

**This vision is a Jewish version of the American counterculture movement in the sixties.**

Yes, I was inspired by the American counterculture movement and wanted to be a counterculture Jew and a counterculture rabbi. At the same time, I decided to return to Brandeis and get a Ph.D. with Altmann, focusing on Kabbalah, which continued to occupy much of my intellectual and

spiritual attention. When I approached Altmann he said to me, "Oh, you want to study Kabbalah? You will learn Medieval Latin and Medieval Arabic and you will take another text of Moshe de Leon's Hebrew writings, as my other students have, and publish it in a critical edition." And it was 1968, in the midst of students' rebellion all over the world, and I was too impatient for that kind of scholarship. So a year later, while I was still studying with Altmann, I and several others founded *Havurat Shalom* as a model Jewish countercultural community.

#### Who else was among the founders of *Havurat Shalom*?

I got a call from Alan Mintz, who asked me: "How would you like to help some of your friends stay out of the Army? If you had a seminary, you could give 4-D deferments, exempting people from the draft." So the resistance to the war in Vietnam and the founding of a Jewish counterculture were together parts of the impetus to create *Havurat Shalom*. The draft laws changed after two years and the danger subsided, but *Havurat Shalom* only grew, its true reason for existence becoming entirely clear.

*Havurat Shalom* was the expression of my desire to create a countercultural Jewish community. The term "counterculture," very popular in that era, had to do with everything from generational style of dress and speech to the quest for economic justice to quasi-pacifism to "spirituality" and the drug culture. You might say it was a moving target, depending on the particular individuals and setting. So I began to get friends together and ask whether we might start some kind of new sort of Jewish fellowship group, one based on prayer and study, but also very committed to the building of community itself. You will recognize some of the names in that original group. Among my fellow teachers were Zalman, who visited in Boston during our first year, Rabbi Everett Gendler, Michael Fishbane, Edward Feld, and several other friends who were recent JTS graduates. The first-year students included Michael Brooks, Barry Holtz, James Kugel, Joe Reimer, and David Roskies. Later we were joined by such others as Seymour Epstein, Gershon Hundert, Daniel Matt, George Savran, Larry Fine, Meir Sendor, and Richard Siegel. (I mention only a few names that are well known in Jewish scholarly and professional circles, but there were many other very fine people in the group as well.) The word *havurah* wasn't yet in our vocabulary but we knew that we were seeking to create something quite different. Here is an anecdote that illustrates how it all started.

I remember one night traveling from New York to Boston with my wife Kathy (we were just married or were getting married) and we stopped in New Haven to visit our friends, Dick and Sherry Israel, who lived there, where Dick was the Hillel director at Yale University. And I told him of this new community and he said, "What are you going to call it?" I said, "I'm thinking about calling it "*Kehillat Kodesh*" And he responded, "That's the most pretentious thing I ever heard in my life."

Well, he was actually right about it.

So, at that time, I was reading about Rabbi Shalom Sharabi, the eighteenth-century kabbalist who had a community called *Ahavat Shalom* in his famous Beth El community in Jerusalem. The members of the fellowship all signed a certificate stating that they would share their lives and would avoid any rancor. I was very moved by that document. So, since Sharabi called his fellowship *Ahavat Shalom*, I proposed that our group be called *Havurat Shalom*.

So that is how one of the most original experiments in American Judaism came into existence.

That is how it happened, despite what anybody else will tell you. Eighteenth-century Jerusalem kabbalists were in the background. But then so too was Zalman Schachter's original vision of *Bnai Or*, meant to be a Jewish monastic (but not celibate) community. Zalman had introduced me to my wife in the context of that vision. Kathy (to whom I am now married nearly fifty years) and I both had strong monastic leanings, a deep sense of personal devotion, and a longing to fulfill them in a communal context. Zalman's vision had, in turn, been influenced by Hillel Zeitlin's dream of a *Yavneh* community in interwar Poland—but that is a story I have told elsewhere.

Prior to *Havurat Shalom*, was there no such thing called *havurah*?

The Reconstructionists had something they called *havurot*, but I had not actually heard about it prior to creating *Havurat Shalom*. But it was *Havurat Shalom* that created the model for *havurot* that became quite common in the 1970s.

Havurat Shalom was quite different from other groups that sought to emulate it, because of a particular approach we were taking to Jewish learning. Without much self-awareness, we were beginning to experiment with a way of reading sources that you might term post-academic. We all accepted the validity of historical-philological criticism, as applied to biblical and Talmudic studies, but we were deeply troubled by the question, "What's the next step? Where do you go after proving that the sacred sources of Judaism are human documents? How are they still sacred texts for us, despite their evolving nature and human authorship?" It was clear to us that such was the case, but we were just beginning to search for language in which to express that. Looking back, I would say that both my theological writings and Fishbane's are rooted in that early question. Our desire to go beyond historical criticism signified an early birth of postmodernity.

**That is an interesting way of putting it. I never made a connection between Havurat Shalom and postmodernism.**

In some ways, I believe that Nahum Glatzer and the memory of the Lehrhaus under the leadership of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig played an important role in the creation of Havurat Shalom. The Lehrhaus was searching for a post-academic approach to Judaism already in the 1920s in Germany. In the United States the study of Jewish texts at Hillel foundations of American universities was also influenced by the model of the Lehrhaus. In fact when Hillel at Brandeis had a study group for Jewish texts that was not an academic class, we called it the Hillel Lehrhaus. I don't remember exactly when Hillel started using the word Lehrhaus, or whether it began at Brandeis, but Glatzer was definitely the link between the Jewish experience on American campuses and that German-Jewish experiment in adult education. In both cases the guiding idea was that you could study Jewish texts differently. Personal questions were relevant and most important to the interpretation of the text. How you felt about the text and what it said to you would be front and center in the act of interpretation rather than dismissed by the teacher by saying "we'll discuss that in my office," as professors of Jewish studies have tended to do. So Havurat Shalom offered a new way of being Jewish in America. We were a group of people, clearly non-Orthodox, but not defined by any denominational label, who would study together very intensively several times during the week, as well as spending Shabbat together.

**So this was a way of being Jewish that revolved around the study of texts but in a nonacademic manner.**

In addition to study, members of the *havurah* would get together on Shabbat for services (including soulful Hasidic melodies and a long "Torah-discussion" instead of a sermon) and communal meals. Studying together and sharing meals were very intensive social and spiritual commitments. The group was, as you have surely noticed, mostly all male, although my wife and a few other women were deeply involved in it along with their male partners. In essence this was a male brotherhood or bonding group and the women were there through their attachments to the men involved.

**The gender imbalance is not so unusual. In the late 1960s women were still considered but extensions of their husbands or fathers, and in this regard Havurat Shalom was rather traditional and conventional. It was precisely the assumption that the woman is not more than an extension of her husband that led Judith Plaskow and other feminists at that very time to challenge traditional Jewish practices and conventions and give rise to Jewish feminism. Plaskow speaks very movingly about her realization that at Yale, where she and her husband were both studying, she was no more than an appendage of her husband at the time, Robert Goldenberg, as far as Jewish life at Yale was concerned.**

Yes, it was in our fellow-*havurah* in New York that Jewish feminist consciousness was first articulated, led by Paula Hyman, Martha Ackelsberg, and others to create Ezrat Nashim, the first group to agitate for gender egalitarianism in Jewish religious life. Judith Plaskow was close to that group. I would say that we thought of ourselves as fully sympathetic to that view (we began counting women for the minyan and inviting them to equal ritual participation in 1969), but our group remained mostly male for several more years.

**But to bring the story back to you, in 1968 you were doing your Ph.D. and you were very active in Havurat Shalom. Right?**

Despite our deep Jewishness and commitment to learning, we at Havurat Shalom thought of ourselves as belonging to an emerging American

counterculture. Indeed many people in 1968 were moving to rural New England, northern California, and elsewhere to build fully embracing communes; others were creating urban communes as alternative modes of life. We were an urban commune, certainly. Although we weren't living together, we had this *havurah* house. We had a rule you had to live within walking distance, because a member's home had to be open to everybody in the *havurah*. Anybody in the *havurah* could knock on your door and be welcome. We wanted to be an intentional community, and we saw ourselves that way, although living up to such an ideal was not always easy, and I could not say that we were completely successful at it.

**This sounds very nice and very utopian.**

Even our program of study was quite utopian. Nobody was allowed to earn money from teaching in the *havurah*, because we were all supposed to be equals. So we supported the *havurah* by each person putting in \$500 for the year.

**Given inflation, \$500 in the early 1970s is like \$5,000 today.**

Yes, but even the students who made little money had to donate the allotted \$500. That's how we supported the *havurah*. Although several of us were studying for our doctoral degrees, which means that we intended to teach for a living, the idea of making money from teaching Torah to our *havrim* was somehow anathema to us. At least if the university paid your salary, making a living from teaching what we cared about wouldn't be as bad. At any rate, teaching in *Havurat Shalom* was a wonderful experience and quite different from teaching at the university. In the first year I taught an introductory class on Hasidut and in the second year I taught a class on Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, which inspired me to write about him. The students were exceptional and the response to the teaching was wonderful because it was all very personal. By comparison, the arid academic style at the university seemed like a dry twig; it was emotionally irrelevant and spiritually empty.

The experience in *Havurat Shalom* transformed me as well. When I finished my coursework at Brandeis I was ready to drop out, because I knew I wanted something different. At some point in my graduate training I had an idea for a doctorate: I was going to write a doctorate on a certain Hasidic master, Hayyim Haikl of Amdur, a very radical type within the early Hasidic

circles. He was a rather obscure figure, but as I started reading his work I saw the power and intensity of his mystical teachings. I said, "Am I going to write footnotes on this? I'm going to kill it with footnotes, in order to prove my academic prowess!" I became disgusted with the academic enterprise and saw no hope for it. I never formally dropped out of the program, but I avoided much involvement with Brandeis. But then after four years in the *havurah*, I saw that my own students were starting to get their doctorates. I said to myself, "If they can do it, I can as well." I went back to Altmann and said to him, "I want to write a book on Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav. Will you accept it as a doctorate?" To my surprise he said, "Yes" quite enthusiastically. So even though my approach to the study of Hasidism was very different from his own, I learned a great deal from his strict academic discipline, and he was quite open to my own readings. Altmann, it turned out, had studied Rabbi Nahman with Joseph Weiss during his years in England, and was very much interested in him—along with so much else.

**Your choice to write a doctoral dissertation on Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav makes perfect intellectual sense. This dissertation published under the title *Tormented Master* is an intellectual biography of Rabbi Nahman. Can you explore the relationship between you, the biographer, and the subject of your biography?**

Yes, this is a very good and important question. I started reading Rabbi Nahman already in college or maybe in my year in Israel, and I immediately grasped that he was a Hasidic thinker who understood the absence of God, who understood that there was a level of reality in which God was not present at all. I read Joseph Weiss's essays on Rabbi Nahman, and I was very impressed with him, both intellectually and spiritually. I wanted to be very close to him but I didn't want to be his Hasid. Why? Because I saw what the Bratslavers were. They were very extreme in all forms of piety, including total opposition to the modern world. But also they were obsessed with sexuality and sexual guilt, and constantly worrying about it. This was not for me, because I had left that kind of religion behind at age eighteen for good reasons, and I wasn't interested in going back. Even though the Bratslavers claimed, of course, that Rabbi Nahman had *overcome* all those struggles and precisely for that reason he could save you from this guilt, I in fact saw them as obsessively wallowing in sexual guilt and the need to be saved from it. I understood that the people attracted to Bratslav Hasidism were often (not exclusively, of course) those who

needed somehow to be saved from profound sense of guilt. So Bratslav Hasidim did not attract me.

**But Rabbi Nahman himself still attracted you. Right?**

Yes, he attracted me because of his profundity, his amazingly creative and associative mind, and because of his honesty. So I wanted a relationship with him that was not structured as a typical dynamic between a rebbe and a disciple. Writing a biography about Rabbi Nahman offered me that relationship, namely, the relationship between the biographer and the subject of the biography. That was an intense opportunity to wrestle with him intellectually and spiritually. Sometimes I had the feeling, in an almost supernatural way, that he was giving me the power to understand him. He was giving me a chance to understand what he was saying, because as long as I was working on him, he had a chance to work on me as well.

**Wasn't that just a pure projection on your part?**

Well, on some level, of course, we have to say so. But if you know my theology, I would never say "mere projection." In order to converse with Rabbi Nahman I had to imagine him, and that is the way my imagination saw it. As his biographer, there was a kind of dialogue between us, not just as the words on a page; he was somehow a living force in my life. My engagement with the Master of the Universe is not entirely different than that.

**Now, he was a *Tormented Master*, as the title of the book indicates. How do you understand his torment? What exactly is at the heart of this conflict that made him so tormented?**

Well, Rabbi Nahman had moments of great expansiveness of spirit, experienced as the ascent of soul, true oneness with God. And he had moments where he thought he was utterly worthless, dust and ashes, with nothing to say and nothing to teach. And in his case this was more than humility.

**That sounds to me like a manic-depressive personality type.**

Well, yes, that may be the case. As you know, Scholem already used that diagnosis in his biography of Sabbatai Zevi. So I wrote Scholem a letter, in

which I said, "I think the same diagnosis might apply to Rabbi Nahman, But I don't want to be the first to say that everyone interesting in Jewish intellectual history is a manic-depressive." Scholem wrote me back (I still have the letter somewhere) saying, "Who are you to say such a thing? You are not his psychoanalyst. You do not have him on a couch." Of course, he was saying back to me what his critics had said to him about his biography of Sabbatai Zevi. There is always some risk when we apply contemporary psychological or psychoanalytical categories to understanding past figures. In general I find the category of the manic-depressive personality type too technical a term for me to use. Ultimately I avoided it as much as possible.

**So, would you agree to say that Rabbi Nahman had a mood disorder?**

He definitely had great swings of mood. And those swings of mood had to do partly with a sense of greatness, ambition, and a sense of terrible guilt. He never overcame all of this guilt; sexual and other kinds of guilt were very big problems for him. But also, he had a sense of being abandoned by God. He had a sense of loneliness, a sense of emptiness. He even tried repeatedly to test his faith and say, "Can I find where God really is?" And sometimes he felt no relationship to God at all. And then, as the initial biography of Rabbi Nahman by his disciple Nathan Sternharz makes very clear, this would happen to him again and again in the same day. He would fall down into the absolute abyss and was able to climb out of it and start from the beginning. But soon afterwards he would fall again.

**It sounds very Nietzschean to me.**

In a certain way, there is a resemblance here to Nietzsche. But shall we call him too a manic-depressive? And how would the use of such a term really help us to come to grips with his thought? Yes, Rabbi Nahman exemplifies the Dionysian urge which Nietzsche speaks about and that was part of what attracted me to him. That urge, as I remember Nietzsche, is exhilarating, but can also drag one down into hell. It is true that they are similar personalities in some ways.

**They both shared great imagination and deep aesthetic sensibility and that makes their temperament somewhat similar.**

Yes, I would agree.

**How did you find the works of Rabbi Nahman philosophically? Did you find philosophy at all relevant to your understanding of Hasidism?**

In the book I wrote a long appendix called "Faith, Doubt, and Reason in the Thought of Rabbi Nahman" which is a kind of philosophical analysis of his writings. I think he's a dialectical thinker. I talked about the dialectical process and different types of dialectic you find in Kabbalah and in what way Rabbi Nahman is a unique dialectical thinker. In this essay I discussed the meaning of the mood swings and the relevance of psychology and philosophy to the interpretation of this dialectic. Rabbi Nahman was always driving for some higher level of integrity out of the conflict between opposites. His thought always had to move in a dialectical kind of pattern and that is part of what makes him philosophically interesting and significant. So the answer to your question is yes, I certainly used philosophical categories for talking about him. But the philosophical categories were existential, not just propositional or discursive. These existential categories bring together the personality and the intellectual moves or arguments. By the way, I think the recent work of Zvi Mark on Rabbi Nahman has uncovered many things, particularly about Nahman as a mystic, that both build upon and go beyond what I had seen.

**In retrospect, what kind of a book is your *Tormented Master*? Is it intellectual history? Is it history of ideas? Is it theology?**

It certainly is not theology. I would define the book as intellectual psychological biography, an intellectual biography with psychological overtones, or something like that.

**If so, how much psychology would you need to know in order to unpack such a complex person? That is another way to rephrase the question that Scholem posed to Shabbtai Zevi. Do we need psychological knowledge in order to understand the writings of Rabbi Nahman?**

I tried to keep the psychology within what I call "insights into personality" rather than specific technical terms. I felt I was not a qualified psychologist, so I did not use diagnostic terms such as "manic-depressive" or "repressed person." But I did read Eric Erickson, especially his biography of Martin Luther, and of course I'd read Freud, as well as Herbert Marcuse's psychological book that deals with Freud. I was also very familiar with the psychological works of Norman O. Brown, whose *Love's Body* was very important to me, as well as the work of R.D. Laing, and the Jungian

Erich Neumann. So I was generally familiar with psychological approaches to literature and they certainly influenced the way I approached the interpretation of Rabbi Nahman, even though I did not pretend to be a psychologist. I simply used the insights gained from this literature and sought to offer an insightful narrative rather than technical, clinical psychological categorization.

**Now, this psychologically inflected intellectual biography or existential psychology is very different from most of your other writings, which are more exegetical. Right?**

Yes. I had written a couple of short personal things early, but I would say that the book on Rabbi Nahman qualified me as a scholar, because it conformed to the style and standards of academic scholarship. And that's what I thought I would do for the rest of my career. Indeed I wrote several academic articles on the Hasidic Zaddik, and I even thought they would become a book on the figure of the Zaddik in Hasidism. I also had a plan of writing yet another biography about Rabbi Yitzhak of Berdichev.

**And it didn't come about?**

Well, after five years at Havurat Shalom, which meant working in a full-time job but with no salary, I had to earn a living. My wife and I were living on practically nothing: she had a little bit of savings and I was giving some lectures at local synagogues and had begun speaking around the country, mostly about the *havurah*. But it wasn't enough to make a living. So I had to seek a regular academic position. I got a job offer at the University of Pennsylvania, teaching Classical Jewish Thought. At that time Larry Silberstein was teaching there in Modern Jewish Thought and he was an old friend from Brandeis. He helped me to secure the position at Penn, where I taught for eleven years and where I received tenure as an associate professor. At Penn I learned a great deal about alienation in the modern labor force, about the failure of the American university, and about the demise of the humanities in the American university system.

**This was in the 1970s, and you already saw the demise of the humanities? That is remarkable, since these years were considered the heyday of the humanities in American universities.**

You see, Penn was even then basically a pre-professional school where undergraduates see themselves as pre-med, pre-law, and pre-business

students. They were there more to make future career connections than to study the humanities. Here is an anecdote that tells it: in the first class I taught at Penn a student came up to me after the first lecture and said, "Professor Green, I love that class but I have a conflict. I don't know if I should take Hasidism or insurance."

**So, I would tell that student, "For your insurance, study both topics!"**

Well, I told the student, "Take insurance, when in doubt."

**So it seems that at Penn you became rather disillusioned with American higher education and that would explain why you left it to become the dean of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Is that the case?**

Well, let me tell you more about my experience at Penn to illustrate my shift in attitude toward the academic study of Judaism. I would go to the Penn library, and go to the section on Judaism where I would see all these bound volumes and journals. I would say to myself: "Who is going to read all these articles? What's it for? What kind of system is this, dictating that for people to earn a living in order to feed their children (my daughter had just been born), they have to generate articles that will be bound in these volumes which nobody is going to read?" The more time I spent at Penn, the more I became disenchanted with and skeptical about the academic enterprise. Let me remind you that I was at the Department of Religious Studies, which at the time was very involved in reflections on the nature of interpretation. These were the theoretical debates about E.D. Hirsch and Hans-George Gadamer that revolved around the relationship between the interpreter and the text and discussions about the observer process. The endless focus on these methodological debates felt barren to me, ever farther removed from the real phenomenon of religion that we were supposedly studying.

At the time I was thinking of writing a book about Rabbi Levi Yizhak of Berdichev, a well-known and much-loved Hasidic master. But how could I write it? The legends about him were all written down long after his death. Did they have any historical value? And what is the nature of legendary history versus real history? Can it ever be separated out? And my role as reader of the legends? How could I write an objective history on the basis of such subjective sources? And what would be its value, anyway? I felt that the task had become so overburdened with methodological hesitations

that I just let it go. At Penn there was a Department of Folklore and they had their own very strong views on these issues as well. But I had been trained as a historian and was interested in writing it as history, based on the precedent of the book on Rabbi Nahman. In this case, however, there wasn't the same body of historical evidence. So I just did not see how to combine history, legend, and folklore. Essentially I had gotten so intimidated by all of the obligations I would have to go through in order to write something with proper scholarly integrity that I just didn't do it. In retrospect I can say that I was not comfortable at Penn. What was particularly discouraging was that the chair of my department wanted me to take out of my curriculum vitae any article that expressed personal religious commitment. So I got the message very clearly: although I was teaching in the Department of Religion, I could not talk about my own religious faith or experience. Even my enthusiasm for teaching the sources was mere "tradition analysis," not a contribution to the "real" conversation, the methodological one. It was becoming clear that Penn was just not the right fit for me.

In 1983, I was invited to teach a class at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia. There I found mature students, eager to learn, much more serious than the undergraduates, and open to the personal questions that had been welcome at *Havurat Shalom* but were somewhat taboo at Penn. When I received the invitation to become dean of the College, it made sense to accept it, even though I had never been a Reconstructionist, and at the Jewish Theological Seminary I had not been a student of Mordecai Kaplan but rather of Abraham Joshua Heschel.

In fact, I never met Mordecai Kaplan, because he retired the year before I came to the Jewish Theological Seminary. I had read some of Kaplan's works but I found him uninspiring; he was too American for me, too pragmatic, and too rational. I was on the trajectory from existentialism to mysticism, neither of which was appreciated by Kaplan. On the other hand, RRC was a young institution, eager to become a stronger place both academically and spiritually, and they felt I had much to offer. So even though I was not identified with Kaplanian Reconstructionism, I was invited to serve as the dean of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

**In retrospect, was it a good decision?**

Oh, yes; it was wonderful. I was initially very happy in my work there, especially in my two years as dean, before becoming president.

**Can you explore this further? The move from the secular academy to the religious seminary would lead us to discuss the relationship between philosophy and theology.**

As I reflect about my life, I would say that twice but really three times I have left a university for a more personal approach to Jewish learning. It happened first at Brandeis when as a graduate student I founded *Havurat Shalom*. It happened again when I left Penn for RRC. And it would happen a third time when I left Brandeis, where I had assumed the Philip W. Lown Chair of Jewish Thought previously held by Professor Altmann, to start a rabbinical school at Hebrew College. So that's my pattern: to leave the university world behind, saying, "thanks, but no thanks," and go off to build a small intense community where learning will be a personal enterprise.

In one of my essays I quote Franz Kafka who said that the reason Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden was not because they ate of the Tree of Knowledge, but because they cut it off from the Tree of Life. That insight was already stated by a kabbalist, Rabbi Ezra of Gerona, seven hundred years before Kafka, but he did not have access to that text, because Scholem hadn't yet published it. This division between the source of knowledge and the source of life is how I experience the dynamics between the university and Jewish religious life.

The modern university is too much about acquisition of knowledge, but that knowledge is cut off from life. Nobody would think to go to an American university to seek wisdom. It would almost seem ludicrous to do so. There is no value given to a search for wisdom in American universities. There's only professional training. The university has become essentially a glorified vocational school for white collar workers, for those professions that need advanced training.

**Could you elaborate on this observation?**

At one time, in the Western world, the search for learning and wisdom was one. This was true in Plato's academy, in the early Benedictine monasteries, in Augustine's circle, and in the yeshivot and madrasas of North Africa and Spain in the Middle Ages. In the centuries of scientific discovery, the European university very legitimately felt it had to wrest itself out from under ecclesiastical control. Philosophy and science had become too

much the handmaidens of religion. In doing this, however, they set up a new high altar, that of critical distance and scholarly detachment. There was a price to be paid for that, one that ultimately led to a depersonalization of learning and to this bifurcation between wisdom and knowledge. That is part of why so many Westerners turn to Eastern sages in pursuit of wisdom; in the East things did not break up in that same way, at least not until very recent times.

**Now, isn't that what philosophy's all about, in principle?**

Yes, in principle that is true. As Heschel used to say, that quest for wisdom is exactly what philosophy is about. But most philosophers today have abandoned that task and that is why Heschel was critical of contemporary philosophy.

**How do you understand the difference between philosophy and theology?**

For most theologians, the enterprise of theology involves reflection on a particular tradition or the religious language of a particular tradition. For a theologian like me, it also involves the universal human reality called religious experience. Philosophy does not see religious experiences as sources of truth. In contrast to most philosophers, I believe that religious experience is a real category of human experience, not reducible to psychological or physiological (i.e., "brainwave") explanation. I am a Jamesian in that sense. Because I see religious experience as a real thing I'm attracted to the comparativist and perennialist thinkers, even though I do not define myself strictly as a perennialist. In the debate about the nature of mystical experience, I am quite far from the view of Steven Katz who sees it chiefly as an expression of cultural context. For me the mystical or religious experience, including the claims it makes on both individuals and communities, must be treated with utter seriousness. Philosophy does not seem to be much interested in that. Philosophy might view it as part of a variety of human experiences, for example like aesthetic experience, but neither of those would be seen as a valid source of "truth" for philosophers today. In contrast to philosophy, I believe that the truth-value of the religious experience is crucial for theologians and for all those who take religion seriously.



You have highlighted the role of religious experience, but what is the role of the sacred text in your understanding of theology? In a scriptural tradition such as Judaism, it is not only the experience that matters but the sacred text that seeks to transmit the experience through postexperience interpretation. How do you understand the relationship between experience and interpretation in the Jewish textual tradition?

In Judaism there is a very complicated and nuanced relationship to the text. I would like to distinguish between three levels of texts: The Torah text itself, the rabbinic sources, and the mystical texts. All three of these follow, however, a more primal "text" that exists beyond language, or perhaps at the birth point of language itself. This is what I would call the divine Torah or, in kabbalistic language, the innermost point of *hokhmah* (wisdom).

The Torah text, as I see it, reflects a product of a long editorial process, going from oral tradition into various fragmentary written accounts, and thence into the written document we have before us. In this regard I accept the findings and claims of biblical scholarship and biblical criticism. I take it for granted that the text emerged over hundreds of years and that it was edited by various schools of scribes and scholars. Nevertheless, I also see the Torah as the text through which Jews throughout the tradition have heard a divine voice addressing them.

And what does "divine voice" mean to you?

It means that the text stimulates and calls for a response. The text becomes the occasion for an inner moment of confrontation, of demand, of quest for meaning, of an answer to the question of what it means to be a human being in the presence of our Creator. I refer to the wordless divine voice that demands: "Where are you?" in the call in Eden or that again speaks the "I am" that opens the revelation of Sinai; it is a voice that precedes and underlies all of human language. The Torah text is also relevant to the community because it is being called upon to collectively define itself around a commitment and a quest for meaning (to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation"). When I talk about "divine voice," I do not mean that God uses vocal chords in order to articulate a certain message. Rather, God addresses the human being from within. This is true for the individual as well as for the Jewish community, the community of the people of Israel who encounter God from within the received text.

The rabbinic project is the interpretive unpacking of that text over the succeeding centuries. It seeks new and multiple meaning in the old revelation, always asking the mostly unvoiced question: "How do we create a human community that lives up to the ideals and demands of this Torah?"

And what is the mystical understanding of revelation?

The mystic wants to see three things: world, self, and text, in a more profound way than ordinary perception allows for. There is a deeper meaning to all three of those, a level of soul to all of those things, to self, to world and to text. The physical world we encounter through the senses is the result of divine withdrawal (*tsimtsum*): God underlies everything, but that presence is hidden from us. The relationship of God and the world is not simply the relationship between Creator and creation; the physical world reflects a deeper underlying structure. The kabbalists understood this when they claimed that the physical world manifests the ten sefirot, namely, the ten powers of forces that constellate divine being. The true human self is neither that of bodily or psychological forces; there is an innermost self or soul that radiates through them and constitutes their true essence. What we see with our senses is again only a superficial appearance of a deeper divine structure. And the same thing is true in regard to the sacred text. The text has a superficial level, which is its *peshat*, and that literal, semantic level functions like the garment of the Torah. Underlying that garment, there is a deeper meaning, which is a secret, or a hidden kind of address. Here I am responding to your specific question about text and experience. In a scriptural tradition like ours, it is most often not the experience of the individual that counts, but the experience encountered within the text. Our mystics tend to tell us rather rarely of what they themselves felt or saw. They would rather unpack for you the depths of what Abraham or Moses felt or saw, as indicated by one or another nuance in the text.

My friend Michael Fishbane expresses these ideas most eloquently in his treatment of the complexity of this process of interpretation in which the soul of the reader/interpreter turns toward the inner meaning of the text, somehow responding to an inner voice that speaks within both text and self. If you open yourself to it, if you expose yourself to it, you experience this reading of sacred texts that lies on the border between existential and mystical religion. Where exactly that border lies is an interesting question. But it is fair to say that the experience is a kind of existential exposure to the text and the voice within it.

**Would it better to talk about an encounter with the text?**

Yes, you can speak about exposure to the meaning of the text as an encounter with the text. And I affirm that I am one of those Jews who belongs to this community that is addressed by the divine voice from within the text. I can't tell you exactly which words are and which words aren't part of that, and exactly how it works. It is different for different people at different moments. It is different for me at different times. Sometimes I will find nothing in a particular text and then I will see a new insight—a new insight in some odd midrashic, kabbalistic, or Hasidic interpretation of it that suddenly makes the text come alive. One of the things I like most about both the Zohar and the early Hasidic masters is the way they have of offering these striking readings of seemingly ordinary texts.

**Would you say that Hasidic texts are highly imaginative?**

They are highly ingenious, representing something of a midrashic renaissance, much in the way that Yehuda Liebes has described the Zohar. The authors' creative powers are largely dedicated to this task of forging a new interpretive lens. Only rarely—as in the case of Rabbi Nahman's tales—do you get truly imaginative creations. But there is something about their original readings that often makes the text come spiritually alive for me. When I encounter Hasidic texts I do feel a kind of divine presence about that moment of insight, that moment of transformative insight where the text that was formerly just words on the page become spiritually alive and I see, feel, hear, something of divine presence in them.

**How much of that spiritual experience is dependent on the Hebrew language?**

Much, a great deal is. It is very hard to experience this spiritual uplifting in translation. I have spent much of my life, as you know from the bibliography, translating these sources to make them available to people in English, but it's very hard. The Hebrew of the Hasidic sources is of course actually very poor. Most of the texts are abbreviated Hebrew translations of much longer oral Yiddish sermons. The spoken Yiddish—of which we have only very sparse record—must have been infinitely richer. When you know both languages, sometimes you can hear the Yiddish syntax coming through in the Hebrew.

I have tried to convey some of this richness in my translations in my work *Speaking Torah: Spiritual Teachings from around the Maggid's Table*. This is a joint project with several of my students, including Ariel Evan Mayse, Ebn Leader, and Or N. Rose, in which we tried to offer the ideas of over forty Hasidic rabbis from 1740 to 1815, all of whom were influenced by the Maggid of Mezerich.

**Again, would you say that the poetic dimension of the text make them so powerful?**

Yes, Hasidic texts are poetic in a broad sense of that term. But it is a poetry that depends rather little on the authors' linguistic skills. The poetry lies mostly in the ingenuity of the homiletic craft, the way verses are read anew and a homily is woven out of them. The demand they make on the reader is also part of that poetic magnet. Kierkegaard spoke of the move from the aesthetic to the religious in terms of the demand made on the individual. The religious text or moment is made such by the fact that it evokes a response that entails commitment. The Zoharic text and many Hasidic texts make a demand on me; they call to me in a certain way that is more than aesthetic. You have to act and live in response to them, in response to this powerful sense of a voice or meaning that attracts you. What are you going to do in your life? How are you going to live your life in a way that responds to that voice?

**Is it fair to say that this is the definition of Jewish spirituality?**

To a large extent; yes, I would say so.

**In the past you had to work hard to convince people about the existence of Jewish spirituality, but today it's no longer an issue either for scholars of Judaism or for the general public. People have come to accept that category.**

Yes, it's a big change in the last thirty years, of course.

**So how do you understand the relationship between Jewish spirituality and Jewish theology or Jewish philosophy? Are those three categories that have little in common or one explicates the other?**

Oh, they are all linked, but they are distinct.

**In what way?**

Spirituality is an attitude toward religion that puts the inner life at the center. Spirituality means that a person has an inner self, that is drawn and responds to this kind of religious language. Spirituality pertains to what happens to you in your life as a meditator, in your life as a person of prayer, the interior "places" where you go when you live an intense religious life. I don't object to associating spirituality with the word "fantasies." Indeed, the spiritual life consists of the fantasies you have or the voices you hear, or the images that pull you. That is the center of what religious life is all about.

It doesn't have to be mystical. Prophetic spirituality is also quite real, but distinct from that of the mystic. The halakhist may also reflect a profoundly spiritual attitude, as seen in such a work as Rabbi Soleveitchik's *Halakhic Man*. Within Hasidism there is a strain of what you might call *priestly* spirituality, in which the devotee serves God like a priest before the inner altar. That is very much present in some parts of the Zohar as well. So it is possible to have different kinds of spirituality, but all forms of spirituality are about the intense contact with a reality that becomes present to you in the inner life. You may call it "God," you may call it "Truth," you may call it "Oneness," you may call it "Absolute Being." But there is some greater transcendent power or presence that becomes manifest to you in your inner life. That, to me, is spirituality. And Jewish spirituality would be doing that against the background of Jewish texts, observances, and experience.

Jewish theology is a reflection. It's a reflection on that spiritual process. It's trying to give it language, to articulate what that spiritual process is about and how it relates to the great historical claims that Judaism has made theologically. So Jewish spiritual life always consists of experiencing God or put differently, what your spiritual life has to do with God.

**In other words, Jewish theology is more reflective and it's one step removed from the actual religious experience.**

Yes, and I don't think you could have a serious Jewish theology without having a Jewish religious life first. Theology is a reflection on the religious life. In my view, too much of theology becomes a barren intellectual exercise because it is divorced from the spiritual life. Unless theology is nourished and enriched by the spiritual life, it becomes trivialized and wooden.

**And what about philosophy? Is Jewish philosophy two steps removed from the original religious experience?**

Yes, philosophy is another step removed, but in truth, I don't think that religious experience matters as much to philosophy as it does to theology. Put differently, I do not think that religious life has the place of primacy in philosophy in that way. That raises the question of Jewish philosophy as distinct from general philosophy.

In all candor, I must say that it is rather difficult for me to say how Jewish philosophy distinguishes itself from Jewish theology but I can say that I am a Jewish theologian and not a Jewish philosopher. As a person who cultivates a Jewish spiritual life, I also try to share it with others and in so doing I engage in Jewish theology. I recognize that in engaging in Jewish theology, you deal with philosophical questions, of course. But I have never called myself a philosopher. And that's why when you approached me about this series I was rather surprised. But after I saw other people included in this series I agreed to participate. So I belong in this series but I really see myself primarily as a theologian and not as a philosopher.

**What is the role of critique within Jewish theology? How much room do you give to the critical modality which I think is part of doing philosophical or theological thinking?**

I certainly do find room for it as long as it doesn't lead to cynicism. I think critique sometimes does that. It becomes of value on its own, and for that reason I worry sometimes about it. I've seen too many cynics in the world of Jewish studies and Jewish thought. So I am concerned about that because I care about the future of Jewish life. Cynicism eats away at the engaged commitment it takes to work toward such a future. But I think one has to certainly engage in critical thought and be willing to be critiqued by others. It seems to me that the dialogue among thinkers is very important in that process.

**With what kind of critique would you imagine theology or the theologians should be involved? Do you have in mind moral critique, social critique, intellectual critique, or all of these?**

I believe you're using the term "critique" a little bit differently than I was. Yes, I have in mind all of the above. Certainly, a theologian should be

involved in social critique and moral critique. I have given much of my life to the training of rabbis. They hopefully serve, among other things, as moral leaders to Jewish communities. This of necessity means that they are engaged in social and moral critique. Much of my study of early Hasidism involves individuals and teachings devoted to what they would have called *tikkun ha-middot*, which might well be translated as "moral critique."

I have written in *Radical Judaism* that I understand a key function of Jewry in the world is that of standing up as a contrary "leaven" in otherwise monochromatic societies. That is how the Midrash understands the term *'ivri* (literally, "Hebrew"). "All the world stood on one side," it says, but Abraham the *'ivri* stood on the other." There are certain essential conceptions in Judaism that I think require one to engage in moral and social critique. Once you have a commitment to the idea that every person is created in the divine image (*tzelem Elohim*), which is the basis of all Jewish moral theology, you have to be a critic of certain kinds of things. My reading of our tradition thus *forces* me to stand up against racial injustice, so horrifyingly still present in our society. It also demands that I stand up for the equal rights of women and sexual minorities, whose full humanity has been diminished by patriarchal and heterosexist societies, including our own, over many centuries.

**Let's explore this point. What does it mean to be created in the image of God? Is it about responsibility, is it about personhood, is it about sentience, is it about subjectivity, or all of these?**

Well, I teach a course on creation in the divine image, so it's hard for me to summarize this idea in a few sentences. The course is arranged historically and it begins with the ancient belief that people look like God.

**Do you mean that human beings have the same shape?**

Yes, people look like God. Originally the belief in creation in the divine image was anthropomorphic in the literal sense. Certainly that was what creation in the divine image meant biblically and pre-biblically. A recent book by Ben Sommers makes that point quite clearly.

**Yes, that is indeed Sommers's argument. But if so, when did people move from such anthropomorphic understanding of divine image to a non-anthropomorphic conception?**

The belief in creation in the divine image came to be refined in various ways. Once you say that God has no body, you have to move to a different sense of what the image might mean. But the spiritualization did not happen all at once. When Hillel told his students that he was on his way to do a mitzvah while walking toward the bathhouse, because washing his body was like a faithful servant cleansing statues of the emperor, he still had quite a physical sense about the divine image. The kabbalists maintained some of this in depicting the *sefirot* in the form of Adam Kadmon, essentially the human bodily structure. It was only those medievals so influenced by Greek thinking who came to insist that the image of God referred only to soul, mind, or freedom of the will. To me, as a theologian, creation in the divine image means that there is something ultimately divine and mysterious about each human being. That has to do with the uniqueness of that individual. And that has to do with the regard we must have for that human life and the value of that human life.

I begin my book *Seek My Face* with a story by Rabbi Nahman, my favorite among his *Tales*. According to this story, each person has a unique portrait of the king to bring home. The king cannot have that portrait of himself until that person has lived his or her life. And so you create the image of God; you discover the image of God and create the image of God in the way you live. One of my favorite lines from Heschel was that the reason *avodah zarah* is forbidden in the Torah and the reason the Torah is so concerned with images is not because God has no image, as a Maimonidean philosopher would say. For a Maimonidean, idolatry should just be a theological error; it wouldn't be a mortal sin. The point is, according to Heschel, that God *has* an image, and that is you! You are the image of God! But the only material out of which you can fashion the image of God is that of your entire life. You take your life and become an image of God. To take something less than a living human being, like a piece of marble or a canvas, and make an image of God on that, becomes a lessening of the quality of the divine image. The divine image is manifest in every human life. That necessarily includes the entire human being, body as well as soul, and is judged by actions, not by lofty thoughts alone.

This statement of course raises an obvious question: what do you do with human beings who are profoundly evil, such as Hitler. Was he also created in the image of God? Even if we do not use such extreme case of radical evil, what do we do with all kinds of people who are very limited? Are they too created in the image of God?

I did not think about these questions but rather on two alternative interpretations of creation in the divine image: Immanuel Kant on the one hand and Mordecai Kaplan on the other hand. For Kant, to be a human being means to act in accordance with the Categorical Imperative which assures that we never treat another human being as a means to an end. The Kantian position allows us to be morally good without belief in creation in God's image. And Kaplan gives us a secular rendering of creation in the divine image when he claims that God is the power to be at your best. So what's wrong with either Kaplan or the Kantian approach?

When you say the Kantian understanding, do you mean the heteronomous need for direction?

Yes, and on that score the Kantian position is very compatible with the Jewish perspective.

It has indeed been seen as compatible with many Jewish perspectives, ranging from Mendelssohn to Hermann Cohen to Yeshayahu Leibowitz. But here you encounter a Jew who is not part of that consensus. I reject the notion that moral behavior requires a heteronomous "commander" of moral authority. (Freud has reread the Kantian position as that of projected father-figure or superego.) My own radical reading of Hasidism, based on that of Zeitlin (whom I pose also as a counter to Emanuel Levinas) calls for an ethos based precisely on the unity of all humans, indeed all beings, within the oneness that is Y-H-W-H. Because my fellow-human and I are one being, fellow limbs on the cosmic body of Adam, as Hasidic sources would say it, to strike out against another is self-destructive. I have to love the other and treat him/her with full respect because he/she ultimately *is* no other. Yes, it is true that I need to see the difference between us, to recognize that no other limb on that single body (or "Tree of Life," if you prefer), is identical to mine. Only that way will I come to true appreciation of it and what it uniquely has to offer to the whole of which I too am a part. You might call this a strongly neo-mystical ethos.

As for Kaplan, the glibness with which he used certain phrases sometimes drives me crazy. To speak about God as "the power that makes for salvation" does not have the same power as creation in the divine image. When I was associated with the Reconstructionist movement, I heard a great deal of rattling off of these phrases, more trivialized in the mouths of the followers than they had been when spoken by their creator. I tried at the time to rescue Reconstructionism from what I saw as an overly slavish dedication to outworn Kaplanian language. Just as Kaplan reconstructed Judaism on the basis of such thinkers as James and Dewey in the 1920s, I argued, so do we have to do the same on the basis of such thinkers as Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, or Peter Berger, for the 1980s or 1990s. Reconstructionism, I argued, needs to be an ongoing process, not a frozen doctrine. I believe the argument made sense, but I found people unable to let go of Kaplan, which is essentially why I left both the institution and the movement. Now I have just finished reading Mel Scult's recent book on Kaplan where he presents a very spiritualized version of the man. He has succeeded in rescuing Kaplan as a deep and complex thinker from the trap of his own language—perhaps in a way parallel to the work that others, including myself, have sought to do in redeeming Heschel from very differently problematic uses of language, to which I have referred above.

I can fully understand this. I invited Mel Scult to give a public lecture in Phoenix and the audience loved the lecture because they could resonate with this secular and deeply spiritual person. Many people in the audience said that they could have been more Jewish had they been exposed to Kaplan's spirituality.

Kaplan comes alive in Mel Scult's portrayal. And somehow he has become Kaplan's mouthpiece. So let me explain what I mean by spirituality and how it is different. A sense of mystery is very important to me. I refer to the elusiveness of the divine. When God says to Moses "*Eheych asher Eheych*" ("I shall be what I shall be"), it means that if you think you can define me as a noun, if you think "*Eheych*" is a noun, I will show you that you have not captured me in the box of your nominal definition. I will be a verb again and run away. The elusiveness of God is precisely why I see the world differently than Mordecai Kaplan. To say that God is the power that makes you the best you can be, as Kaplan says, allows for a certain moralizing reductiveness. I understand rather that God is some mysterious transcendent entity that's represented in every human being, in every moment and every place. We must choose to use that universal divine

energy with which we are blessed for the good. But that energy, the presence of God within us, can also be perverted and used for evil. We, being in the divine image, contain all of those possibilities. This is the mysterious and elusive, as well as the challenging and demanding aspect of being a person. The mystery of the person remains essential to me. That mystery is not the same as mind. It doesn't reside in a particular place. But it is the quality of humanity that makes for the sanctity of the human and makes human life invaluable. This is why killing a human being is not the same as killing an animal.

Just today, I received an e-mail that was sent to other students and alumni of the Hebrew College Rabbinic School from a person who graduated a year ago. He responded to the atrocity of the killing of three Israeli youths by Palestinians associated with Hamas. The email pondered how to deal with the trauma of the killing theologically and rightly asked how the Torah helps us to make sense of this atrocity. What was troubling was that he referred to the people who killed the three youths as "those animals." So I wrote back, saying, please reconsider the word "animals." My point was that their act of murder was an act of dehumanizing people, but we should not dehumanize the perpetrators of the act in response. That's not what we should be doing when we encounter injustice or inhumanity.

I feel the same way about the attempt by some to expand the notion of *tzelem Elohim* beyond humanity, to include all creatures. This is done in the name to an ecologically sensitive Judaism, a cause toward which I have great sympathy. But I do believe in the uniqueness of humanity, a classical Jewish position with which I fully identify.

**That brings up an interesting theological issue: Since for you God is present in the mystery of being a human, is God also present or manifested in the physical world or the physical environment?**

Yes, of course. God is present in the physical environment. That is a bed-rock position of all my theological writings.

**In what way?**

I am in that sense, a panentheist, you know.

**Could your elaborate?**

The Hasidic adage (originally from the Zohar) "no place is devoid of God" is very important to me. That's the essential insight of the Baal Shem Tov.

Hasidut begins when the Baal Shem Tov awakens us to the fact that there is no moment, there is no act, there is no place that isn't overflowing with the presence of God, if you open your deeper mind to it. That is his—and its—most essential insight. "All the rest is commentary," you might say. The cultivation of that awareness throughout daily life becomes the essential task of religion. And that is what I understand by spirituality.

**Your explanation is still human-centered because it focuses on human awareness of the Divine. But what's the ontology that you presuppose when you talk about panentheism? What is the cosmology that make possible your panentheism?**

My ontology and cosmology are an updating of that articulated by the kabbalistic worldview that I inherit. I believe there is a One that precedes and underlies all that is. That One was there in an utterly unknowable and indescribable form (*Eyn Sof*, for the kabbalist) prior to the Big Bang and was present in every molecule of gas and every particle of rock that was hurled forth by it. So too is it present in this hunk of rock we call our earthly home and in every object, both animate and inanimate, upon it. It served as the charge that stirred the chemical brew out of which life first emerged, and it is fully present in every life-form that has emerged since. This is my reading of the kabbalistic understanding of *yesh me-ayin*, the multiplicity of existence emerging from within the unknowable divine Self. The presence of that One in each creature may be described by the Hebrew phrase *koah ha-po'el ba-nif'al*, the power of the Maker within the made. This means that all existence, including the great wonder of the evolutionary process, stands as testament to God and to ultimate religious truth.

I am fully aware that Kabbalah as a "science" or grand system of truth was discredited by the end of the eighteenth century and that it more or less collapsed partly because of its over-complexity. Kabbalistic ontology and cosmology, were deeply challenged by modern science and philosophy. So all we have are the broken pieces of that ontology. I do not have an ontological system that tells me how to make sense of the divine presence in the world. I do understand that my religious language is about the oneness of Being, and that oneness of Being is manifested particularly through the process of evolution. That is the One that enters into the process of evolution; the One that undertakes the evolution of all forms. These ideas are expressed in kabbalistic language as the garbings of the One, the disguises of the One, or the masks of the One. And that One Being underlies and essentially constitutes all beings that are. All beings

are somehow manifestations of the same single Being, the being which is referred to in Hebrew in the ineffable name of HWYH *Havayah*, which is Y-H-W-H backwards. In this worldview everything that exists points to the One and in a sense all beings are part of the same reality: the One that underlies them.

When you think of those beings as individuals, they collectively make up existence and are HWYH, or *Havayah*. But when you think of them as One they open to an infinite mystery, a dimension that was not seen before, and that HWYH becomes Y-H-W-H. Being, in other words, gets a capital B or is transformed into a divine infinity, not because there is some divine entity "out there," but because being itself can be seen both from a secular point of view as existence itself and from a divine point of view as Y-H-W-H. It's the same being.

**So how is this worldview different from Spinoza?**

The difference is in perception. The difference between that and Spinoza is that for me there is always a mystery beyond. When HWYH turns around and becomes Y-H-W-H you are talking about a mysterious reality that you can never plumb the depths of. It is not "nature" that becomes equivalent to God, as in Spinoza. All of nature contains that presence but that presence reaches infinitely beyond anything we can know. I like to say that I believe in transcendence, but in a transcendence that is present within immanence. Transcendence means that the One is present in this moment in such a deep way that we can never fathom it. This is not the same as saying transcendence is "out there" somehow on the other side of the universe, "beyond" us in some "out there" place. I don't know such a place. I don't know what that means. And yet, in terms of cognition, I believe there is a transcendence, there is a depth we can never fathom.

**The way you put this sounds reminiscent of Heschel's depth theology, namely, it is an insight about depth rather than about transcendence.**

Yes, of course. But that depth *is* transcendence. That is precisely my point! Yes, I am in that sense Heschelian. There are places where I remain very close to Heschel and there are places where I get off the train, so to speak. The first hundred pages of Heschel's *God in Search of Man* remain essential to me. All his talk of depth theology, awe, mystery, wonder, are to me the very building blocks of what the religious imagination is. Once he begins to answer the question about revelation, he becomes too much of

a religious personalist for me. Heschel offers a personalist theology with deep mystical undertones. I am a mystical and panentheistic theologian who uses personalist language, especially in my devotional life. But I understand it as metaphor. Nevertheless, in terms of the way we think about what a religious question or the religious mind is, Heschel is right on point and I remain deeply indebted to him.

**When you spoke about the divine presence in the world you mentioned the word "evolution." How do you understand the term? Do you have in mind in a technical sense of Darwin's theory of evolution, or do you mean it more loosely in the sense of development or unfolding?**

By "evolution" I mean that Darwinian evolution itself is that unfolding. In other words, I am a believer in Darwinian evolution, but I think we have to learn to see it with new eyes. We have to learn to see it as the unfolding of that one Being which constantly seeks to be manifested in more and more forms, greater diversity, and greater complexity. The One is in this process of natural selection by which change happens. I do believe in natural selection. And yet if I see that from a Heschelian point of view, with what he calls the eyes of wonder, I see that there was, and still is, a certain magnificence to that process which I call the greatest of all sacred dramas. That's how I begin the first chapter of my book *Radical Judaism*.

**Darwin's theory of evolution, however, emphasizes randomness and chance. Can you accommodate these aspects of Darwinian evolution in your understanding of divine presence?**

There are indeed nasty aspects to the process of divine unfolding. And that's where theodicy is still a challenge. I don't think that pantheism solves the problem of theodicy. The problem is no longer "Why did God choose to make evil people?" Or "Why does God seemingly reward evil people?" Rather, the problem of theodicy should be understood as "Why did we have to evolve through all of this competition and aggression and fierceness?" Why did that species become extinct as part of the evolutionary process? Why did the divine unfolding have to happen that way? And I do not have an answer to that question. I don't think that question can be answered. I think we have to be present to that question but there is no answer for it.

Let's take Stephen J. Gould, as a representative of evolutionary biology. His insistence on randomness and on the lack of teleology goes a

step beyond what I believe he has the right to say as a scientist. There is no doubt that evolutionary biology is correct to state that this whole process of evolution takes place through natural selection, but to say that the whole process does not have any teleology to it is a philosophical or theological statement rather than a scientific one. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not an Intelligent Design person in the usual sense of that term, and I am not asserting that there is somebody "up there" who is figuring it all out. Rather, I am saying that the process of evolution manifests an inbuilt mechanism that moves both toward complexity and toward diversity, though not uniformly. There are places where simpler forms emerge later, but in the big picture there is movement toward diversity and complexity. The emergence of the human brain out of what were once one-celled animals is something that we have to notice with something other than just a statement of randomness. There has to be something between absolute randomness (namely, everything is a matter of sheer chance) and Intelligent Design (namely, God made it that way).

**Yet in order to think through these issues we need to get into the intricacies of emergence theory, which, as you know, is receiving a lot of attention in several sciences (physics, biology, psychology, and even the social sciences). So, how do you understand the role of science in enabling us to cope with the intellectual challenges of the twenty-first century? Should we pay more attention to science?**

Of course, we should pay attention to science. Of course, religion was transformed in the twenty-first century because the triumph of science in the twentieth century posed two great challenges to religion: both the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of revelation are challenged by scientific findings and theories. Astrophysics and geology have challenged the theology of creation which is the foundation of Jewish theology. The great Jewish theologians all understood that Judaism rests on creation theology. You can't understand Maimonides or the Zohar without creation theology.

They both understood that you can't assert the belief in providence and in miracles, which are so central to Judaism, without creation theology. So creation theology is a very important theme in Judaism, and it was in part because of the twentieth-century scientific challenge to the doctrine of creation that so many Jews moved away from Judaism in the twentieth century. But I think that we have to address the situation by making clear that we believe in evolution and that we are finished with arguing with the theory of evolution or trying to deny it. The problem is once you

accept evolution as a fact, where do we go theologically? How can our theology for the twenty-first century endorse evolution while continuing to affirm the great insights of Judaism? While I am not a literal believer in either providence or miracles, the centrality of dealing religiously with the question of origins remains central to me. My careful readers will understand that in fact both of these categories, providence and miracles, do have meaning for me on another level.

**Yes, that is indeed our contemporary challenge.**

And so, for believing and practicing Jews, science certainly has to be considered and has its own legitimate domain. To address the challenge we may do well to differentiate between "science" and "scientism." We should also inquire whether science sometimes oversteps itself, as I have just suggested, and asserts claims for which (in principle) there can be no scientific proof. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century there is a certain failure of nerve of the West in terms of its belief in scientific progress as the answer to all questions. I think that the awareness in the limits of science explains why there is such a quest or thirst for Eastern spirituality in recent decades. The traumatic experiences of Auschwitz and Hiroshima are the reason for the failure of nerve in the West. People have finally come to realize the potential dark side of science. To say that scientific progress is somehow going to answer all our moral and spiritual questions has proved to be a mistake or an illusion.

These key events have proven that science was not enough, that we need something more. We need to recover some other dimension of human truth. And I think that the contemporary quest for a scientific language that could be appropriate is reminiscent of the quest for Plato and Aristotle by religious people (Jews, Christians, and Muslims) in the Middle Ages. They somehow sought and discovered an ancient language of truth that had to be recovered. Similarly people today are looking for a suitable language that could express new scientific truths. Some find it in Buddhism or Vedanta, reappropriated for the West. I have sought it in a radical rereading of a Western esoteric tradition, one essentially more at home in our culture, but needing very significant updating.

**So we are all seekers now?**

Yes, today there's a kind of seeking in the society because we are looking for something that goes beyond the scientific paradigm. But that's not to say that I reject science at all.



**What do you think about the so-called science and religion conflict? Do you believe that conflict is always an illusion or do you try to offer a systematic answer either scientific or religious?**

To say that the conflict is always an illusion is certainly too dismissive of the problem, and therefore I wouldn't say that. I think we sometimes have to look further. I think that religious truth to some degree belongs in a realm that science cannot answer or address. I am not referring only to the existential level, which it is clear that science cannot address, but also more broadly: I think that there are things about the nature of reality that science does not know. Categories like dark energy tell us that science itself recognizes domains which are still not ultimately penetrated by science. Some of the mysteries that religion deals with will have to do with those same cosmic realities. So both science and religion meet places where they are transcended by mystery. And those are some of the places we have to explore together as scientists and as religious believers. I believe that we can overcome the conflict between theism and atheism and I consider much of the current public debate to be full of nonsense because of the shallow stereotyping on both sides.

**Let's take Richard Dawkins, for example, because he is central to these public debates. He is an evolutionary biologist who represents the cause of atheism and who has been very critical of religion. Is he a scientist who causes a lot of damage because he posits a necessary conflict between science and religion, or is he expressing what a lot of people feel and think?**

He's expressed something a lot of people feel, but I think his notion of religion is trivializing and dismissive.

**Yes. I would agree with you.**

I don't think he understands religion in the kind of profound way that one might and should. I don't think he has been exposed to or knows anything about mystical thinking, be it Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist mystical thinking. I would like to see a genuine dialogue about the nature of Being that includes scientists and religious scholars who are also practitioners. I'll volunteer to represent Hasidism. I'd like there to be Sufis, Christians, Buddhists (perhaps the Dalai Lama), and Vedanta followers,

alongside some proclaimed atheists. I think there are things we could all learn from each other. But when Dawkins and others like him dismiss religion because it means believing in an old fellow in the sky who created the world, that's just too low level of conversation and it is not worth having it on that level.

**What do you think would happen when physicists get together with Buddhists to talk about dark matter. Isn't that what you propose?**

Well, it would be an interesting conversation and I would like the kabbalists to be present in it. Let me make it clear that I'm not a scientist and I don't pretend to be a scientist. But when I read in the *New York Times* how scientists are talking about what happened in the first three trillionths of a second after the Big Bang (as distinct from the fourth trillionth, mind you!), I hear something of kabbalists talking about the process in which the first three sefirot emanated from the *Eyn Sof* (the divine Infinite) in the highest of the four worlds. There is something going on there. This is not mere coincidence; the type of thought is deeply parallel, not just the numbers. So there seem to be two alternatives. Either the kabbalists speak within certain structures of the human mind that lead us to a certain understanding of external reality, and these structures persist, leading astrophysicists to speak the same way, or the kabbalists had some kind of true insight into cosmology that they expressed in a highly medieval and hierarchical language but that somehow still comes through. My instincts tend toward the former explanation, but that's why we should have the conversation. Even just the parallel between the structure of the human mind and the structure of reality sometimes makes me shudder, reminding me of ancient descriptions of the human being as microcosm. And so I would like somebody who knows Kabbalah to be part of that conversation between the scientists and the Buddhists about dark matter. I think we might have something to say or at least learn in that conversation.

**How do you explain the popularity of Kabbalah today? Why is Kabbalah today, among Jew and non-Jews, so successful?**

I often lecture on this very topic. I say that Jews tried two hundred years ago to excise Kabbalah from the tradition. They created a new concept called "mainstream Judaism," which you can't say in Hebrew, because it's really not a Jewish concept. But so-called mainstream Judaism was

created to exclude certain things from the mainstream and that was primarily Kabbalah. To modern Westernizing Jews, Kabbalah was an intellectual embarrassment. Two hundred years later, Judaism is scrambling to recover it. The desire to recover Kabbalah is based on the awareness that something has gone wrong in the West. Whether it is nuclear danger or the ecological danger, the sense of overconsumption and of living at too fast a pace, we have finally become sensitive to the fact that we are destroying the world and that we are going to destroy one another. There must be, so it is thought by many, some ancient wisdom that was ignored in the course of the rush toward modernity that we must now go back and recover. Maybe on some Buddhist mountaintop in Tibet (a literal or metaphorical mountain) we will find it. Maybe the kabbalists have it. Let's go seek out the wisdoms of the ancient traditions of the world and see if they can teach us something that will keep us from destroying each other, from destroying ourselves. So I think that quest is real and very meaningful. That's what I call a postmodern quest for religious truth. Modernity has collapsed. Modernity has shown its inadequacies and therefore we look for an alternative to it. Now there are dangers in that, of course. As soon as you open that postmodern door, it turns out the premoderns are happy to welcome you back, because the premodern never disappeared, as we know very well from the experience of living in Jerusalem, where we are holding the interview.

**It seems to me that you are proposing a post-postmodernism, because the postmodernism is but a critical posture that does not offer us a framework for living meaningfully.**

Yes. I understand what you mean by post-postmodernism. I am reappropriating the term "postmodern." I definitely do not mean it in the sense in which it is usually used, originating in the world of literary criticism. That usage leads mostly to a blind alley of incomprehensibility (at least by lesser minds like mine). Instead I mean that the critical assumptions of the modern world, especially its religion of progressive scientism, have been deeply called into question. Since the alternative to it includes a recovery of ancient traditions, the Spinozan insistence that the Bible (and other Scriptures) may be read only at face value needs also to be set aside, hence legitimizing the rebirth of midrashic creativity that has been so prominent in recent decades and thus reviving interest in the mystical/esoteric readings as well.

**If I hear you correctly, you claim that ancient wisdom traditions such as Kabbalah or Buddhism offer us a perennial wisdom that we could tap into in order to make sense of our life in the present.**

That's right. And it is not limited to one tradition. This is not zero-sum game among traditions. If mine is true, yours is false. But rather there is some wisdom to be discovered in human history that needs to be recovered. So I think the recovery of Kabbalah is part of that. We have Hindu traditions, we have the various Buddhist traditions, the Christian monastic tradition, the wisdom of the Sufi schools, and we have Native-American traditions, to mention just a few. We also have the kabbalistic tradition which is that part of Judaism that encompasses that once-abandoned and mostly lost esoteric wisdom.

I started to study Kabbalah about fifty years ago. At that time a few Jews, mostly in Israel, were attracted to Kabbalah on the academic level. Dare I say that we should thank God for sending us Gershom Scholem, who made the texts and ideas available to the succeeding generation? I say so only partly tongue-in-cheek, knowing how amused he would be by that thought. Today a large number of people have come along and want to recover this tradition beyond academic study. In the past twenty years, we have witnessed a huge number of books written about Kabbalah and Jewish meditation not for mere academic purposes but for Jews who want to live by them. (Some of these, but by no means all, are even good books!). So the question is what should be done with it? What is the value of Kabbalah today? Is it just medieval nonsense that expresses a hierarchical worldview unacceptable to people who believe in egalitarianism or equal rights, or can it be stripped of some of that baggage and still be useful?

Although as a pluralist I should be open to diverse approaches, I think the various disciples of Ha-Rav Ashlag have not been helpful here. They began with the overly articulated Lurianic system he encountered in Bet El of the early twentieth century and have tried to strip it down to make it accessible. Some have taken Kabbalah and tried to convert it into a business. They have discovered, lo and behold, that modern people, even some with college educations, can still be afraid of the dark. So you give them an amulet to protect them from the dark. Or you offer them various other protections from the dark or from evil spirits, or promise them success in business or love life or whatever else they desire. That's nonsense. It is the worst use of Kabbalah for the self-enrichment of the promoters. The

profundity of kabbalistic thought is lost in a kind of popular self-help lingo, combined with the more superstitious parts of the kabbalistic legacy.

**Is Rabbi Leitman's appropriation of Kabbalah, which uses modern technology, the right thing?**

I don't think so. However, the fact that he has his own TV channel in Israel is telling me something about the contemporary quest for the recovery of the wisdom of Kabbalah. That's one of the things I aspired to do when I wrote a book called *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow*. The message of this book is that if you're going to recover Kabbalah for today, here is my own suggestion of how to use it in a positive way, which is mostly about psychological and personal spiritual insight. I'm delighted that this book too, along with *Radical Judaism*, is now being translated into Hebrew.

**Since you also published *Radical Judaism*, would you say that this recovery of Kabbalah is radical Judaism?**

Well, yes. I would. Radical in both senses of the term: first in the sense of being transformative and second, in the sense of going back to the roots.

**So why did your book *Radical Judaism* receive some criticism? How do you understand the critical responses to the book?**

Well, I actually think that the book received a very positive and even a very excited response from many Jews. The main challenge came from the Orthodox world, especially from a rather fierce attack by Rabbi Daniel Landes of Pardes. The several exchanges between us are available on the Internet, and are very worth reading. I found his critique somewhat annoying in that I didn't think he read me very carefully.

But he is certainly right that there are wide divergences between my views and the theologies currently associated with Orthodoxy. I am not a believer in what he considers particular providence and I am not a literal believer in either creation or the revelation of Torah. I do not believe in any view he would recognize as affirming either God as choosing the Jews as His holy people or in a God-initiated covenant. So if he is ticking off the list of Maimonides' thirteen articles, he will find me on the negative side of most. I don't know that he would know what to do with me, a Jew who insists that he is a religious person, who davens daily, who lives within tradition, and who spends all his time studying and teaching Torah. Ah,

he finds another such example in Mordecai Kaplan, so he assumes I must be a Kaplanian. But that is not taking me seriously.

Perhaps my interpretation of revelation that sees revelatory moments as internal events is threatening to Orthodoxy, even though I have Orthodox students who are somewhat close to my theology. Let me just say this. I am happy and proud that among my closest students there is a very wide range of observance. Some of them take my theology and use it to bolster their very traditional Jewish life, which includes deep commitment to halakhah. And some are quite far to the left of where I am in the sense that they interpret Judaism even more radically. I'm a traditional Jew, but I do not think in strictly halakhic categories. I'm happy to see that diversity among my students because my teaching is not about halakhic practice per-se. Judaism is not only about what you should do, precisely, in the sphere of ritual behavior. It does tend to get too caught up in those questions, and the current denominations are all defined around that. My message to my students is, rather that you spend your mental energy on more important questions. Regarding praxis, figure that out for yourself; take responsibility for your own spiritual life. Ultimately I think those decisions are very much about personal needs and personality types.

Since I thrive on that diversity, I deliberately created the rabbinical school in Boston as a trans-denominational, pluralistic institution that has people who are very observant and people who are very little observant. But what I'm interested in is challenging their thought and calling them to develop an inner life, a spiritual life of their own, and deciding in the course of that how they want to live as Jews. I am not interested in telling these rabbinic students "this is what you may do and this is what you may not do." I want to open them to the voice calling from within the text, then seeing how each of them responds.

**So, as a communal leader and institution builder, what is your message to Jews today both in America and in Israel in terms of diversity and pluralism? How do you seek to address the internal tensions that Jews experience today?**

The Jewish People is reconstituting itself in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For a very long period of time, we were a closed society. Nobody wanted to become a Jew because becoming a Jew was too dangerous, often even forbidden by law. The fate of the Jews was so abysmal that nobody wanted to join the Jewish People. Therefore, for 1,600 or 1,800 years, Jews were the sons and daughters of Jewish mothers and a

few crazy people who somehow "fell in" or joined the Jewish community through conversion.

But now we have a very diverse Jewish People that include various groups and individuals whose biological lineage cannot be proven. For example, Ethiopian Jews have been recovered to Judaism, but who knows if they had any biological connection? An Egyptian rabbi in the sixteenth century said they did and that gave permission for the rabbinate in Israel to recognize Ethiopian Jews as Jews in order to bring them to Israel. The recovery of Ethiopian Jewry was indeed heroic, but it changes the collective body of the Jewish People. Similarly, Israel has a large population of Russian Jews who have migrated here, and half of them intermarried. It is not easy to prove the biological lineage of many Russian immigrants, but we should see them as a new branch grafted unto the Jewish People. In America I see so many people, very interesting people, who want to convert to Judaism. In fact, ten percent of our rabbinical students are now Jews by choice. And some of our very best students and most serious future rabbis are Jews by choice. I'm an adoptive parent, so my daughter is a convert to Judaism; of course, she was converted as a child. So the current interest in Judaism and conversions to Judaism indicate that the Jewish People is reconstituting itself. Unfortunately, many people, a great many people, who were born Jews, are dropping away. If I look at the grandchildren of my own first cousins in America, even from the more traditional part of the family, most of them will not be Jews in another generation. They're intermarried and they're not raising their children as Jews, so their Jewishness is finished. So the tree of the Jewish People has a great many branches; some new branches and buds are coming in, while others are ceasing to be Jewish. The total number of American Jewish population is up because of the arrival of Russians and Israelis, not because American Jews are having enough children to replenish their numbers. For these demographic reasons, I am for opening the gates and welcoming those who want to join the Jewish People to do so without too many hurdles. As the late Reform Rabbi Alexander Schindler said a few years ago, I would like to see a campaign, an active campaign of giving Judaism to seeking Americans who are looking for a religion. I think we make a mistake in not doing that. I am all for a kind of high level attempt at trying to find new people who want to become Jewish. This should especially welcome people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Then the Jewish People will continue, not as the same biological entity it was for 1,800 years, but in the hands of people who want to carry this tradition forward, in open and creative ways. Some of them will be born

Jews, and some of them will become Jews. Some of them will be close to the Jewish People but not formally converting to Judaism. This phenomenon is very common today and you see these people in synagogues especially in the American West: non-Jews go to synagogues because they're interested and attracted to this tradition. I would like to find some kind of broader community of Bnei Noach, or some other such term, that will include those who are attached to the Jewish People without formal conversion. And some of them might become actual converts later on.

**This was exactly the situation in antiquity when many pagans were attracted to Judaism but did not go through conversion. They were called God-fearers and it was this population was most susceptible to Christian preaching.**

Well, yes, but that was the best period we ever had for getting our message to the world.

**So given this vision, where does the secular Jewish person fit into your understanding of contemporary Judaism? Since you want to be inclusive, do you also welcome secular Jews?**

Yes. I want to be inclusive and yet for me, personally, this is all about the spiritual life. So the secular Jew poses a hard challenge for me. I talk to Israelis a good bit because I visit Israel very often. I love being here and I come frequently and I have many connections here. Many people tell me that they are secular (*hilonim*) and they insist on that word. But once I begin talking to them, I see also spiritual seeking in them and openness to something which does not fall under the category of the "secular." There are many Israeli spiritual seekers who are coming back from India in these post-army trips who are discovering there really is something to spirituality that they couldn't discover in Judaism because the hostility to a spiritual interpretation of Judaism is so great in Israel.

But I also recognize that there are people who really are secular people. I wish them well and I have lots of things in common with them because of my Zionism and my love of both Hebrew and Yiddish and my love of Jewish culture and Jewish literature. I'm happy to share those things with secular Jews and secular Israelis, but as I see it, they are missing a certain dimension in life, which is what spirituality is all about, and which I would like to expose them to. I try not to act as a missionary to such people. I don't say, "You must do this" or "Here, put on Tefillin tomorrow." I do not

act like a Habadnik who wants to persuade Jews to become observant. But I would like to share that kind of spiritual dimension which for me is the core of what it means to be a Jew.

**If I hear you correctly, there is a tinge of condescension, or paternalism, in your attitude toward the secular Jew. Do you consider the secular Jew a kind of a misdirected person? Is that fair to say?**

"Misdirected" is too strong. I wouldn't say that the secular Jew is misdirected, but I would say that the secular Jew is lacking a certain dimension that I find essential to Judaism. "Misdirected" feels a little bit too accusatory. So there's no accusation there, there's no failure on that person's part, yet there is a lack of openness to a certain dimension of experience.

**Is it like being tone-deaf, so to speak?**

Yes. There are dimensions of experience to which I am pretty tone-deaf. You haven't heard how bad I am at music. There are also dimensions of human life which I do not experience, for example, physical outdoor experiences or athletic experiences. These are great dimensions of human life about which I know very little and to which I'm not exposed, nor do I make a point of trying to expose myself to them. So there is no condemnation involved here, just a regret that those people do not share in this element of life that I find so enriching.

**It is somewhat ironic, since Zionism to a great extent is the precise attempt to recover and emphasize the physical dimension of being Jewish. Zionism is about living in the physical world as opposed to the world of sacred texts.**

Yes. Now, whether Zionism succeeded, of course, is a very big question. Take for example the question of Hebrew labor, which was one of the core goals of Zionism. In Israel today, manual and physical labor is generally performed by foreigners while Israelis enjoy professional life that has little to do with manual labor. Israel is a success story today because of the high-tech revolution, not because of the Zionist return to manual labor.

**Yes. That is true, and perhaps Zionists have lost an important connection to the land because of the move away from the initial vision.**

Given this transformation it is fair to ask: have Jews really left the life of the mind at all? Has Zionism changed the Jewish character at all? And

the answer is "only partially so." Israel today is a secularized version of what Jews have always been, which is to say intellectuals and entrepreneurs, once called scholars and merchants. I think that if Ber Borochov were alive today he would be horrified to see Israel as the great high-tech society. The Socialist vision of Borochov and others has become utterly obsolete, failing to remake Jewry in its image.

**What do you think are the major challenges to Jewish existence today?**

I can name several serious challenge to the future of the Jews: the situation of Israel is the biggest moral and political challenge. The second challenge is assimilation in the West where Jews live in an open society and there is no guarantee they will remain Jewish. I would say that these two are the greatest challenges facing Jewry as such. Of course we are all involved in the great human challenge of whether we will allow our biosphere to survive as a habitable place for human and other forms of higher life—but that is one that we share will all our fellow humans.

**When you speak about the moral challenges of Israel what exactly do you have in mind? The attitude toward the Arabs and Palestinians or other social problems such as treatment of the poor and the aged?**

Where do you want to begin? The moral challenges are so numerous and so complex. Although I am not particularly a believer in providence, as you know, the opportunity to create a Jewish society, which I deeply believe in, was given to us for a reason. I think history told us that we had a right to as well as a need for a Jewish state, both because of anti-Semitism and because of our need to live in a place where Jewish culture would be the central culture of the society. But that gave us a great opportunity to demonstrate the moral values of Judaism. In Israel we have to take ideas like justice and proper treatment of the stranger and determine how these would apply in a Jewish society where we have a way to express our moral values. And I feel that it has not been a great success. Our ability to be a host society, a welcoming society in which we are a majority, has not worked very well.

**Are you talking particularly vis-à-vis the Palestinians, or more broadly vis-à-vis foreigners who work in Israel?**

Let me talk first about attitudes toward Arab Israelis first, and the conquered population of the Palestinians second, and then foreign workers third. But I think that maltreatment of non-Jews began even before the

establishment of the State of Israel. In the Jewish tradition there is a certain dehumanizing of the other, a certain failure to recognize the other as a full human being with full human needs. This exists in the kabbalistic and Hasidic sources that I love in a particularly strong degree. It is a failure to understand the other that might have made sense as a strategy of survival for an oppressed minority. But coming to the Land of Israel after centuries of exile necessitated sharing this land with those who had been living here. The Zionist slogan of "People without a land for a land without a people," was very attractive to European and American Jews, but it was not historically accurate or true. We were not really taught that there was another people living here in the Land of Israel that had to be considered and recognized for its human needs and political aspirations. There is something about Zionism that looks an awful lot like colonialism.

**Do you accept that claim which is commonly stated by post-Zionists as well as by Palestinian and Arab critics of Israel?**

Well, I don't accept it entirely, because we Jews were a victim people. We were not a wealthy colonizing people like the British or the French. There's a great difference between the Zionist experience and colonizing experiences in Asia or Africa. We were not exploiting Palestine to send its riches back to a mother country elsewhere; Jews came to Eretz Yisra'el because we had no other country! But certain attitudes that were conveyed within the Zionist enterprise feel and appear an awful lot like neo-colonialism. And we Jews, all of us, in Israel and abroad, have to be careful that Zionism not be that. Zionism as it exists on the West Bank today looks to me an awful lot like that.

**But here is our dilemma. The negation of the other, especially the Arab other, is commonly justified by appeal to the biblical text. This is especially common among Jews who belong to the settlement movement who consider the West Bank not as occupied territory but as a territory which belongs to the Jewish People by divine promise. So, what do you as a religious Jew who cares about the unjust treatment of Arabs or Palestinian say to the settlers?**

I think we are currently engaged in a great struggle for the soul of Judaism. In this struggle, we cannot allow people like Rabbis Yitzhak Ginzburg or Meir Kahane to claim the tradition. Of course their approach has

authentic roots in the tradition, but so does the opposite view to which I subscribe. It is the Talmud, not just some twentieth-century liberal, who asked "Why was only one human created? So that no person say to another: 'My father is greater than yours.'" It was Rabbi Shim'on ben Azzai in the second century who said that the most basic principle of Torah is "God created every person in His image." These truths apply to Arabs as they apply to all human beings. I believe that Jewish statehood is the toughest moral test to which our people and tradition have ever been put. The jury is still out, but I do not believe we are doing as well as we must. I think it's a question how the tradition is read and how the tradition is used. If I am doing anything in my life it is to educate a generation, and even several generations, of future Jewish leaders who will engage in that struggle for the soul of the tradition and will see the tradition as a universalizing and humanizing spiritual force and not as a xenophobic, racist, narrowing, exclusive claim of truth. That battle has to be fought every day, and right now we are not doing well in that battle. The forces of xenophobia are very powerful and numerically stronger, partly because the ultra-Orthodox community is producing many more babies than liberal and progressive Jews, and partly because of awful forces at bay in the Muslim world that are truly terrifying. For this reason, what will be the future face of Judaism concerns me greatly.

That terrifying prospect is the reason why I do much of what I do. I am in my seventies and I am still teaching rabbis. I'm still training future generations of rabbis because I think people exposed to my kind of thinking and the kind of thinking we represent are the only alternative to a future of those forces taking over Judaism and claiming the tradition as their own.

**Your project of claiming the tradition sounds to me as a political project or at least a project that has political implications. Is that right?**

Yes, that is correct. My project is indeed political and moral as well as spiritual and theological. I have always refused to make that distinction.

**And on the spectrum of the Jewish political spectrum, where would you locate yourself?**

I'm on the left edge of the Zionist movement, the critical edge within Zionism. I've always considered myself a Zionist, which means I believe

in the right and value of creating a Jewish society in Israel. But I firmly believe that unless we have a two-state solution, there is no future for this Jewish country. And I believe that it has to be a generous two-state solution, meaning all of the 22 percent of Palestine, including joint capitals in Jerusalem. But so far we have had no generosity in our treatment of the Arabs. Generosity has not been a word that has been commonly used in public discourse in Israel; it has not been a virtue that has existed in the Jewish project. What happened to the Talmud's description of the Jews as the most compassionate of people, *rahmanim beney rahmanim*? Rather, the post-1967 settlement project has all been about competition: How much land can we grab for ourselves? How much can we "Judaize" this area or that area? How much can we reclaim this land from the Arabs? How can we declare more to be state land, so that we can build more Jewish settlements and so forth. The people who interpreted Zionism in this manner have not realized that it's not going to work unless we are going to act in accord with the deepest moral values of Judaismism.

Yes, some of that went on before the state was established as well. The Palestinians were not wrong in saying that we established our state at their expense. But I think our history justified that; our desperation, and then the Holocaust, created the moral right we had to come to the land and build a Jewish homeland. I see myself as a religious Jew but a secular Zionist. We have a right to return to our ancient homeland not by divine fiat, but due to historical circumstance, much of it tragic. But now, after 1967, we are the victors, the much stronger party, and we need to act with decency and kindness toward the Other. That decency has to begin with Arab citizens of Israel, who must be extended full equal rights and respect. The Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza must be given a state of their own *when they are ready to offer us true and secure peace and full acceptance in return*. I do not see us doing that, nor, sadly, do I see them being ready to offer what is required. Both sides are failing.

**So that's the challenge that faces all Jews whether they live in Israel or in the diaspora. Is that so?**

I think that's a great moral challenge. And I think we're not doing well with it and I'm very, very worried about the future here. Because I see that two-state solution slipping away more every day and instead people are talking about unilateral actions and the creation of one-state solutions and I just don't know what it means.

**Is that challenge more threatening to Jewish existence than the open society, where Jews could eventually cease to be Jewish, or is it just different?**

I don't know. I don't know how to put the two on the scales against one another. The open society in the West is also a great challenge. But it is also a great opportunity, as is Israel. Yes, we will be smaller in numbers. I think the Jewish community in the diaspora is going to shrink. But you know, I'm not too worried about numbers. I do see at the core of that community in the diaspora as well as here, a group of people who want to learn and think in ways that hadn't happened before. When I look at the high level of adult education programs that we have these days, I know that there is a thirst for Jewish knowledge which is very positive and very promising for the future of the Jewish People.

The open society is also an opportunity. In the United States Jews participate in great decisions about the future of humanity, environmentally and otherwise, and they do so as the most successful of all immigrant minority groups. In the U.S. our tradition is highly respected so that Jews are asked about Jewish views on a great many issues facing our society. I also take great pride in the presence of Jewish activists in the struggles for equal rights for minorities, gender equality, and many other battles for human decency.

**The way you talk about America seems as if for you America is the "Promised Land."**

Well, it's not quite the Promised Land, America, but there is a sense that Judaism is seen in America, which is this very religious country, as one of the great spiritual traditions.

In America many non-Jews want to learn what Judaism has to say about crucial issues of Western culture. We have a voice at the table, so to speak, in the society, and for this reason Judaism can play a very important role in determining the future of humanity. And maybe it's not accidental. Maybe we have to take that voice and have something positive to say in the world. "Who knows," as the Book of Esther says, "whether it was not for a moment like that that you came into a position of authority?"

**Do you see any role for Jewish studies in that project of saying something positive to society at large?**

Do you mean Jewish studies in the university today?

I refer to Jewish studies as an academic endeavor. Can it play a role in your vision?

Well, as I said in the beginning of the interview, I have left the university behind because I wanted to teach and help create a Judaism that would have something vital to say about the survival of humanity, about the great questions that confront us, about how we live in the twenty-first century. The university has abdicated that vision. The university, dedicated to its own high altar of critical distance and objectivity, has become more than a little bit afraid to engage in the great questions that face us.

Well, postmodernism has already undermined that vision of objectivity.

If we find Jewish scholars in the university, or the academic world, who are willing to come back to those questions of personal values and relevance, I would answer your question in the positive. Yes, since Judaism has something to say, gaining access to Judaism through Jewish studies and Jewish scholarship could be relevant to my project. So I want Jewish scholarship to become revitalized in that sense of having something to say about the great questions of our time.

To what extent do all those great questions become more acute because of the Holocaust? So far you said nothing about the Holocaust. Has it become a marginal issue for Jewish identity in the twenty-first century?

The Holocaust, in which a third of world Jewry was meaninglessly slaughtered, effected a tremendous trauma upon the body politic of the surviving Jewish People. We were stunned for perhaps half a century, during which the single critical question, especially for the survivors and the Israeli society that embraced them, was "How do we survive?" I think the Holocaust has affected all of us, of course, including our theology, and everything in Jewish culture of the second half of twentieth century. But I am now happy to report that I see some signs of recovery in the collective body of Jews. The new openness to spiritual search, both in North America and increasingly in Israel, has about it an aspect that says: "We are tired of screaming at God. Anger has not helped us to heal. It is time to try another way." Neither has excessive distrust of humanity, seeing murderous anti-Semitism everywhere, helped us to create a healthy Jewish future. So the Holocaust must be remembered and commemorated, to be sure. But we must also allow ourselves to leave it behind as we ask what Jewish life we want to create for the coming generations.

I could not agree with you more. As we shift toward a positive and hopeful view of the future, what do you consider as positive changes in contemporary Jewish life that suggest growth and vitality?

The two greatest changes in the content of American Judaism I have seen in my decades as a Jewish leader are the feminist revolution and the recovery of the Jewish mystical tradition. I would like to say a bit about the relationship—or lack of relationship—between these two phenomena.

I have already spoken briefly about the origins of the inner Jewish feminist movement in circles close to the *havurot*. That group was joined by an Orthodox faction, ably led by Blu Greenberg, and a cadre of the first women admitted to liberal rabbinical schools, eventually in all three non-Orthodox denominations. I have been an active supporter of this effort from its inception; more than half the rabbis I have helped to train and ordain over the course of these decades are female, and I take great pride in the good work many of them are doing throughout the Jewish community. At the top of my list of favorite female students is my dear friend and colleague Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, my successor as dean of the Hebrew College Rabbinical School.

It has not always been easy being a man in a position of authority during this period of great change. Particularly in the early years, many of the women coming into their own in training for Jewish leadership carried a good bit of anger about their former exclusion. Naturally some of this was poured out on older male representatives of the tradition who happened to be handy, even if those were precisely the men working to educate women and welcome them into shared leadership. There were aspects of second-wave feminism that bore a militancy and a sense of righteous indignation that were not always easy to handle. These included a sense among some that women should declare themselves worshippers of the goddess, since men seemed to have created a male deity for themselves. I came to realize that the real issues in these conversations had more to do with a sense of disempowerment than they did with essential theological issues. Theology was a convenient field in which to give expression to deep and justified frustrations.

In the other great change in American Judaism, I have taken a leading role over several decades. I was the first one to regularly teach courses on Kabbalah and Hasidism to liberal American rabbis. I am proud to say that the need for such study is now widely recognized, and that some of my own students are serving in that role. In several different settings (Shalom Hartman Institute, Institute for Jewish Spirituality, etc.) I have also had



the opportunity to teach these materials to already ordained rabbis who regretted not having learned them in rabbinical school.

As is well known, the issue of gender has a prominent place in kabbalistic symbolism, particularly around the figure of *shekhinah*, elaborated so richly especially in the Zohar. Interpretation of the Song of Songs and the use of sexual and marital metaphors fill nearly every page of the voluminous kabbalistic literature. Of course all of these figures were produced in the imaginations of men living within a highly patriarchal era. Nevertheless, there is great beauty in them, and I believe they might form the basis for a new and expanded Jewish spiritual language to be built by both women and men in this era of new access to learning and openness to Jewish religious creativity.

For this to take place on a high level, we need women who will become deep students of kabbalistic literature, while at the same time mastering contemporary psychology and feminist theory. I have been hoping for several decades to attract such students, but have not succeeded. My doctoral students have all been men. For some reason, the young women who take classical Jewish learning most seriously in this country are nearly all attracted to Talmud, partly with the thought that innovation in Jewish law will be a good platform for female empowerment. (Interestingly, in Israel the situation is quite reversed. Perhaps half of the doctorates in Jewish mysticism are earned by women, while the universities' Talmud departments are peopled almost exclusively by former yeshiva guys.) I want to take this late opportunity in my career to appeal to young women who have an attraction to spiritual matters to become serious scholars with an eye toward a text-based effort at such neo-Hasidic or neo-kabbalistic creativity. We need you!

**This is a powerful ending to a very stimulating discussion. Thank you for sharing your vision for the future of Judaism, the Jewish People, and humanity and for taking the time to hold the interview.**

Thank you for including me in this worthy project.

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