

JEWISH SPIRITUALITY

FROM THE BIBLE
THROUGH THE MIDDLE AGES

Edited by
Arthur Green

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Introduction

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud;
have mercy on me, answer me.
In Your behalf my heart says:
"Seek My face!"
O Lord, I seek Your face.
Do not hide Your face from me;
do not thrust aside Your servant in anger;
You have ever been my help.
Do not forsake me, do not abandon me,
O God, my deliverer.

Psalm 27:8-9

SEeking the face of God, striving to live in His presence and to fashion the life of holiness appropriate to God's presence—these have ever been the core of that religious civilization known to the world as Judaism, the collective religious expression of the people Israel. Such a statement of supreme value—aside from questions of how precisely it is to be defined and how it is achieved—could win the assent of biblical priest and prophet, of Pharisee and Essene sectarian, of Hellenistic contemplative and law-centered rabbi, of philosopher, Kabbalist, *hasid*, and even of moderns who seek to walk in their footsteps.

Life in the presence of God—or the cultivation of a life in the ordinary world bearing the holiness once associated with sacred space and time, with Temple and with holy days—is perhaps as close as one can come to a definition of "spirituality" that is native to the Jewish tradition and indeed faithful to its Semitic roots. Within this definition there is room for an array of varied types, each of which gives different weight to one aspect or another of the spiritual life. For some the evocation of God's presence includes an "ascent" to a higher realm and implies knowledge other than that vouchsafed to most mortals. Others content themselves with "preparing the table of the Lord" or, alternatively, seek to discover "the tabernacle within the heart" and allow the *shekhinah* (Presence) to find a dwelling there. The ultimate vision

may be one of a highly anthropomorphic Deity seated on His throne, an utterly abstract sense of mystical absorption within the presence, the imminent arrival of messiah, or simply that of a life lived in the fulfillment of God's will. What all these have in common is a commitment to the life of holiness, a faith in the power of Israel's ancient code to embody that holiness, and a knowledge that such a life fulfills God's intent in creation and in the election, however understood, of His "kingdom of priests," the people Israel. This consensus has lasted until modern times when we find, as we shall see, Jews in search of the spiritual life who can no longer accept its premises as classically outlined by Judaism.

The definition of Jewish spirituality offered here has rather little to do, it will be noticed, with the term "spirituality" itself, for which there is a precise Hebrew equivalent, *ruhaniyyut*. The reader sensitive to the nuances of Hebrew speech will recognize this word as a latecomer to the ancient Hebrew tongue. It is an artifice of the medieval translators that was created first to express philosophical and scientific concepts that were Hellenic in origin. It was taken over only later by Kabbalists and pietists to describe a religious ideal that by then indeed was a thorough amalgam of the spiritual legacies of Israel and Greece. Spirituality in the Western sense, inevitably opposed in some degree to "corporeality" or "worldliness" (all apologies to the contrary notwithstanding), is unknown to the religious world view of ancient Israel; it is rather a late element, though an important one, among those factors that make up the religious legacy of medieval and later Jewry.

Defining spirituality as the cultivation and appreciation of the "inward" religious life, we find both assent and demurrals in the sources of Judaism. Surely the Psalmist was a master, indeed perhaps the original Western master, of inwardness, and the early rabbis knew well to speak of "the service within the heart" and the values of silence and solitude. There are latter-day Hasidic treatises focused almost entirely on the cultivation of *ruhaniyyut* and *penimiyyut* ("inwardness"). At the same time, concern is aroused lest the inner be praised at the expense of the outer. The rabbi, the spiritual descendant of both priest and prophet in this matter, will perforce rise to defend the externals. If inwardness implies a depreciation of the outer and dismisses religious behavior (in the moral as well as the ritual realm) as mere ceremony or trappings, the rabbi will find this a notion hard to tolerate. Religion, as far as the rabbi is concerned, is the living word of God, ever evolving through interpretation, a word that concerns itself with proper behavior in every domain of life at least as much as it does with matters of the heart.

Aware of these reservations, and wary generally of applying to a particular tradition terms and categories that are alien to it ("mysticism" too is a

category that does not exist within classical Jewish sources), we nevertheless permit ourselves to speak of Jewish spirituality, defining it as we have Israel's striving for life in the presence of God. This should allow talmudist halakhist, and commentator to take their deserved place within the collective "spiritual" enterprise alongside the more obvious prophet, philosopher and mystic.

This view is also meant to dispel the ancient and widely held notion that there are in fact two Judaisms, one of the flesh or the law and the other of the spirit, or one of the mind and the other of the heart. This idea has a surprisingly long history and has been held by Christian detractors of Judaism who reflect the biases of the New Testament, but also by many Jews themselves. The Kabbalists supported a version of this idea, claiming that their teaching was the "soul" of Judaism and that without it rabbinic practice was but a lifeless body. Students of Judaism in the early twentieth century, themselves rebels against the stultifying world of the Eastern European *shtetl* ("small town"), also put forth a version of this idea (one thinks here of Buber, Berdyczewski, and Horodezky), by which they hoped to save and renew the heart of Judaism while casting off its outer shackles. From the historian's point of view, there is no single secret doctrine that serves to quicken Judaism, to save it from becoming a life-threatening morass of detail. Jews throughout the ages, including the early rabbis themselves, have struggled with this issue of providing meaning and spiritual content to the tradition. Some have done so in highly systematic fashion, creating such grand edifices as Jewish Aristotelianism and classical Kabbalah. Others, including the Hasidic preacher, have chosen to do so in a more spontaneous and sporadic manner. The very notion of a divine or primordial Torah, a thought that has accompanied rabbinic Judaism since its earliest days, seems, as Gershom Scholem has pointed out, to call forth a sense that there is some deeper esoteric meaning to the text at hand, some secret that is more than any ordinary human reading of Torah can provide. All of the systems of meaning that have emerged within the classical Jewish context have made use of this idea and have found within it the theological license for that exegetical creativity which is in fact the tradition's very lifeblood. "Turn it over, turn it over, for all is in it" has allowed sages and seekers of the most varied sorts to see their own thought, influenced as it may be by spiritual currents far from those of ancient Israel, as the true meaning of their own religious legacy. There are not *two* Torahs, a revealed and a hidden, but rather both *one* and *many*, as many as the ongoing creativity of the Jewish people can provide.

A history of Judaism from the viewpoint of the phenomenology of religion has yet to be written. The ways in which classic patterns of myth,

symbol, and archetype survive the great transformations wrought by biblical religion and reappear, *mutatis mutandis*, in rabbinic and later Judaism are yet to be fully traced. The unique element of diaspora, spreading the Jews throughout the Western world at an early and crucial stage in their religion's development, also needs here to be taken into account. The traditions that grew out of that monotheistic and iconoclastic revolution in ancient Canaan, overlaid with memories of the Babylonian exile and its Persian aftermath as well as with evidence of the early contacts of Israel with Greece and Rome, were carried throughout the known world by bands of faithful wanderers. Yet who would dare say that Judaism, even of the most pious and traditionalist sort, remained unaffected by the cultural patterns of those in whose midst particular groups of Jews happened to settle? It is not at all clear that a Jew in Spain in the twelfth century and one in Poland or Bohemia some five hundred years later, even if performing the very same ritual actions, were in fact doing the same thing. Distinctive religious subcultures emerged within the history of Jewry. Even in latter-day terms, if one thinks of Lithuania, Italy, and Yemen, highly diverse images of Judaism come to mind. These, it should be added, were not simply mirror images of the respective non-Jewish cultures amid which they were created: Jewish communities themselves, separated by distances of both time and space, created cultural and religious life patterns that differed greatly both from one another and from those of the host cultures in whose shadow they flourished.

Nor were differences in religious types attributable only to variations in historical or geographical circumstance. The same Amsterdam of the seventeenth century was home to rationalists and messianic Kabbalists, both of them probably nurtured by the same combination of Marrano past and expanding future. Warsaw at the turn of the twentieth century housed *hasidim* of various stripes alongside socialists, Zionists, Yiddishists, and Hebraists in every imaginable combination—all of them products of, some of them rebels against, the same cultural milieu. Any account of the spiritual life of Jewry undoubtedly is in need of the word "varieties" somewhere in its title. Indeed it may be that a major lesson the Jewish experience has to offer the historian of religion is just that: even within this "smallest of all the nations" there lies a vast array of different religious types, spiritual activities, and attempts at self-understanding. No single characterization or typology of "Jewish spirituality" could possibly comprehend them all. How much more true must this be for religious empires far more vast than the relatively circumscribed realm of Jewry!

What then is it that coinhabitants of this religious and cultural phenomenon known as Judaism have in common? First, it must be said that they

all are Jews, and this is no mere tautology. Judaism is the religious path of a distinct national group, one that has defined itself in ethnic as well as religious terms throughout the ages. The shared legacy of national symbols, including language, land (held dear, as history has shown, despite long absence), and common history, including but not limited to a history of persecution, is quite inseparable from Jewish religious identity. Yet the historian of religion must probe further, asking what it is within this legacy of the past that makes for the vital and ongoing thread of Judaism as a religious enterprise. In this search, one is first tempted to go the route of essentialism: somewhere at the core there must be an essence of Judaism that all its many bearers hold in common. This was, in fact, the path taken by most presentations of Judaism for the Western reader, including both attempts at "objective" religious history and works of advocacy by Jewish theologians, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Of course this essence was usually articulated in theological terms—and then often in terms not unsurprisingly accommodating either to the writer's particular religious stance within the Jewish community or to the properly liberal and Western values that an author might have thought his readers would find most comfortable. Thus, ethical monotheism, the struggle against idolatry, and a vague commitment to "the rule of law"—though not to particular laws—were emphasized by liberal Jewish writers, whereas *halakhab* in its specific sense, but also expanded to "the halakhic mind," was brought to the fore by traditionalists.

Aside from the obviously self-serving quality of some of these presentations (and our selection from them admittedly borders on caricature), the attempts at arriving at such an essence have been largely discredited in Jewish scholarly circles because of recent developments in historical research. Essentialism always wound up positing a "mainstream" in the history of Jewry; those who diverged from whatever the particular set of norms was said to be were then characterized as minor groups of dissenters, who cut themselves off from the ongoing stream of Jewish history. But the work of mid-twentieth-century Jewish scholarship has almost entirely discredited the notion of *any* theological mainstream. Erwin R. Goodenough, researching the archaeological remains of Jewry throughout the eastern Mediterranean world, gave the lie to the widely held view that a rabbinic mainstream, puritanical, iconoclastic, and uncompromisingly anti-syncretistic, dominated Palestinian and Babylonian Jewry in the first centuries of the common era. Harry A. Wolfson has shown how thoroughly Jewish philosophers from Philo to Spinoza were part and parcel of the Western philosophical tradition, at times having more intellectually in common with their Christian and Muslim counterparts than they did with Jews who stood outside

philosophy. Above all, Gershom Scholem and his studies of medieval Jewish mysticism and seventeenth-century Sabbatian messianism have had a revolutionary impact on the field of Jewish studies as a whole. Scholem has forced us to realize that notions of mainstream were posited largely out of ignorance and were sustained by the selective suppression of evidence. This process reflects the cultural biases to which historians, perhaps only slightly less than theologians, were themselves subject.

The elusive quality of any essentials that might still be said to underlie, even in an unspoken way, most or all Jewish theologies is heightened by the nonfundamentalist relationship that traditional Jewry has always had with its sacred Scripture. Although the veracity and theoretical authority of the Bible were taken for granted from the Hellenistic era down to modern times, unanimity about the meaning of any but the most bland of biblical phrases was utterly lacking. There is no postbiblical Jewish theology in any age that could claim to base itself on a *peshat*, that is, an obvious and straightforward reading of the biblical text. The contest between interpreters is not about which have Scripture on their side, but rather about which display the greater ingenuity in marshaling scriptural support for their views. When in medieval times certain dogmatic formulations achieved a status that was nearly canonical (belief in divine omnipotence, or in creation *ex nihilo*), Kabbalists and others played freely with these, reinterpreting their meaning to suit their own ideas.

What then, if not theological essentials, will serve as the binding substance for the variety of Jewish spiritual expressions? It seems safe to begin with the *text* itself. All Judaisms since approximately the first century C.E. have had in common a defined body of sacred Scripture. Though exegetical license has indeed reigned free, it is not fair to assume that the text has made no claims on those who are faithful to it. These claims, the ones least bendable by interpretation, exist first in the realm of religious deed and, second—but by no means insignificantly—in that of religious language, imagery, and style.

The relative unanimity of premodern Jews in matters of religious action, codified as *halakhah* or the “path” is well known. The commandments of the Torah as defined and elaborated by the early rabbis were accepted as binding by all Jews except the Karaite minority at least from the early Middle Ages down to the seventeenth century. There were, to be sure, ongoing debates concerning both details of the law and the seemingly large matter of what exactly it was that constituted the 613 commandments of the Torah itself. But these were dwarfed by the overwhelming unanimity in most matters of praxis, including both those matters “between man and God” and those “between man and man,” or the ritual-devotional and the moral-ethical

spheres. It is worthy of note that neither premodern Hebrew nor Yiddish has a term that may be properly used to translate “orthodox”; *shomer mizvot* (“observer of the commandments”) or, in the more casual Yiddish vernacular, *shoimer shabes* (“Sabbath keeper”) is as close as one could come. It was this unanimity of life pattern that allowed for Moses Mendelsohn’s claim in the eighteenth century that Judaism was in fact a matter of “revealed legislation.” This, of course, allowed for the wide berth of intellectual freedom that he as an enlightener sought. This view of Judaism, though thoroughly discredited by the nineteenth-century “essentialists,” was based in the reality of long experience with one aspect of the tradition, the relative unanimity of deed and form.

Deeds, of course, are an aspect of symbolic speech, especially so when they take the regularized and repeated form of ritual. Alongside this type of speech-act, then, contemporary scholarship suggests that Judaism (like any religious tradition) has a unique pattern of verbal tropes and rubrics that constitute a unifying style of expression, one that transcends even great chasms in theological meaning. Any theology of Judaism, for example, must claim to believe in one God; monotheism is embodied in the essential trope of *shema’ yisra’el* (“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” [Deut 6:4, recited in the daily liturgy]). A theology that denies the truth of the *shema’* or openly proclaims belief in a multiplicity of heavenly powers can hardly claim a place within Judaism. But the range of meaning given to the *shema’* remains quite open; the One may be a unity of ten powers, as for the Kabbalist, or the *shema’* may attest to the absolute oneness of God and world, as for the *HaBaD hasid*. The fact that both of these views stand in utter contradiction to the theology of Hebrew Scripture constitutes no real problem in the history of Judaism, but stands rather as a monument to the exegetical success and freedom of these latter-day thinkers.

Another such basic trope is the belief in Torah as revealed at Mount Sinai. Again, a Judaism without some sort of Sinaitic revelation is inconceivable, but the range of beliefs about exactly what was given at Sinai, or what it means to speak of revelation, or the degrees of difference between inspiration and revelation is tremendous, especially if one takes into account the great variety of modern Jewish positions on this matter. Realistically speaking, the traditional claim that “whoever says ‘This verse’ or ‘This word is not from heaven’ is one who ‘despises the word of the Lord’” comes down to mean that those who can find no place for *some* concept of *Torah mi-Sinai* have rejected an essential rubric of Jewish discourse and thus have placed themselves outside the theological consensus of Israel.

Do we then propose naught but a new essentialism, one of tropes and rubrics rather than of dogmas and ideas? It should not be difficult to

compile a list of essential religious vocabulary of which the would-be Jewish theologian could make rather free use. Of course (Heaven be praised! we should perhaps add), the matter is not so simple. Having used rather obvious and easily labeled examples, we speak of a literary and theological *style*, one carried in part by the mention of certain key terms but hardly reducible to them. The ways in which these terms are used, the frequency with which they appear, how they are juxtaposed with one another, and a whole host of other more-or-less intangible elements collectively constitute the religious language of Judaism. The well-trained eye of a text scholar or ear of a native speaker learns to detect unusual patterns, changes in meaning, and shifts of emphasis even in the seemingly most standard bit of rabbinic discourse. Especially interesting here are two late genres of premodern Jewish theological literature. Scholem's studies of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century documents in which Sabbatian heresy was masked behind the language of traditional piety are instructive in illuminating the outermost limits of Jewish religious language and the ways in which even an exaggeratedly pietistic Jewish style can be distorted to produce radically new meanings. Similarly, the literature of Hasidism, though hardly heretical in the same way, offers the careful reader a chance to explore the traditional language and style of Judaism pushed to the extreme, as the masters use it to legitimize the particular religious values for which they stand.

The Judaism that all held in common was, we are claiming, a shared religious *language*, rooted in a body of sacred Scripture and anchored to daily life by a prescribed pattern of deeds. Like any language in currency over a wide geographical area and through the course of many centuries, it evolved, changed, grew, and developed its own varied "dialects." A multiplicity of religious types found within it sufficient breadth and depth to express their differences of vision and understanding; even those labeled "sinners" or "heretics" in times of controversy continued to make use, often the most creative use, of this religious language. Only in modern times has the language itself suffered a serious challenge, as the weakening of its own faith claims has combined with the tremendous assimilatory pressures on Jewry to diminish greatly the hold it has maintained over the Jewish people. But the challenge to tradition, the various attempts to buttress it, and the large and highly variegated movements of modern or postmodern Jews seeking to return to its fold are themselves all a part of the ongoing history of Jewish spirituality.