ROAD BACK TO SINAI: THE POST-CRITICAL SEEKER

Arthur Green

Y-H-W-H and Language

Vav, the third letter of the divine name, represents a *drawing forth*. It lengthens the *yod* and brings it into the world. *Yod*, the first letter, is just a point. A point lies at the border between existence and nonexistence, between being and nothingness. This is all we can say of existence at that early stage. In *yod*, divinity remains entirely hidden. *Heh*, the most primal field of feminine energy, then joins with the *yod* and brings forth the universe in an act of cosmic birth. Now *vav* returns to the *yod* and lengthens it, drawing it forth in the form of language. It is the source of life become articulate, the primal *davar* (thing), now received by humanity as *davar* (word), the One as spoken word. The One as *yod* is not-yet-thing. As *heh* it is all-things-in-birth. Now in *vav* it is manifest as *language*.[1] This manifestation in the word is what allows the One to be known by the human mind, which thinks in the categories of words and language. *It is this apprehension of the One-become-word in the human mind that we call revelation.*

The reader will rise to protest. "We have already seen the two sides of the One! Stasis and movement, Y-H-W-H without and Y-H-W-H within, God 'before' Creation and God 'in' Creation, *sovev* and *memale*, emptiness and fullness, naught and all. What room can there possibly be for another category here? *Is not Creation itself sufficient revelation*, the One manifest throughout the world, 'renewing each day, constantly, the act of Creation'? What more could we need?"

---

* Excerpt is from *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology* (pp. 97–144) © 2003 by Arthur Green (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing). Premission granted by Jewish Lights Publishing, P.O. Box 237, Woodstock, VT 05091, www.jewishlights.com.

[1] *Vav*, representing the six *sefirot* around *tif'eret*, is associated with voice in kabbalistic sources. This divine voice is still beyond language, not yet "contracted" into words, which would take it to the *malkhut* level. The kabbalists see this entire process of the emergence of language as taking place within God, revelation as the self-articulation of divinity. I understand language as a human institution, and hence the transition from "voice" to "speech" as the move from pregnant divine silence to human articulation of the divine reality. To say it in kabbalistic language, *malkhut* (speech, oral Torah) can come about only after *netzah* and *hod*, the event of prophecy. The "written Torah" of *tif'eret* does not yet have words; it is still the Torah of the single *aleph*. But we, coming from without, can know it only through the path of Torah as manifest in human language.

Yod Heh is indeed a divine name on its own.[2] Were our world simply that of nature, one not transformed for us by human consciousness and creativity, *YaH* alone would suffice. Adding the *vav* to *Yod Heh* is a recognition of our human distinctiveness, our special status as *medabberim*, speaking, thinking, and conscious beings. The One as manifest in Creation, *Yod Heh*, belongs equally to all; it is part of human protoplasm in the same way that it is part of animal, plant, and rock. The human may recognize it, but does not own it in any distinctive way. In YaH-in-Creation we are part of the natural order. But now, with the addition of the *vav*, that One enters in a wholly different way into the human mind; the all-pervasive presence is now *spoken* within us, and that can happen only to creatures of speech. *God becomes word as we become human.*[3]

In turning to address our people's ancient tale of Sinai from this theological perspective, we find ourselves turning doubly from the general to the specific. We turn both from the universal-natural to the specifically human, and from the universal-human to the specifically Jewish. *Yod* and *heh* encompass all existence. *Vav* belongs to the human alone. Until now, we have been dealing with truths known and revealed to all humans, as discussed in the language of a renewed Judaism. Now we turn to the heart of Judaism itself.

Before the Mountain

We are beset by trembling as we approach Sinai, the mountain peak of Jewish faith. Here is the turning point between the revelation of divinity and the response of humans. We cannot speak of one without the other. Divine voice and human voice are fully intertwined with one another, bound in embrace like the two cherubim over the Ark.[4] Divine speech is made accessible to us only through the human vessel,[5] one that embodies

[2] On the concluding verse of the Psalter, the rabbis comment: Since the Temple has been destroyed, it suffices to praise God with two letters [*Yod Heh*, rather than the entire name] (*Eruvin* 18b). In the future, the full name will be restored.

[3] Word, not flesh. The theology proposed here is not incarnational in the Christian sense, but it has in common with Christian incarnationalism the central recognition of human distinctiveness. For us, the word remains word, in the form of both written and oral Torah.

[4] *Yoma* 54a. Cf. A.J. Heschel, *Torah min ha-Shamayim* (London: Soncino Press, 1962), vol. 1, pp. 62ff.

[5] The rabbinic sources for this position have been collected and discussed by Heschel, ibid., vol. 2, pp. 264ff.

it and hides it at once. Human languages are many, each of them bespeaking the divine encounter in its own voice, hiding-revealing the One in its own way. The divine life as manifest in the world is open to all and goes beyond the language of any tradition. The divine light shines on all without distinction; it is only the differences in our own cultural settings that make for religious difference, that receive, refract, and transmit the light through various symbolic vessels. But when we discuss human response to the divine reality, we can discuss only specifics. Humanity has responded to the reality that is God in multiple ways. Here, the Oneness of God is refracted through the variety of human traditions, rites, prayers, and forms of expression.

Sinai indeed takes us to the heart of Jewish faith: it claims that there is communication from God to humans and that such communication took place between Y-H-W-H and Moses and Israel at that mountain in the wilderness. Through this revelation, the will of God as manifest in Judaism becomes known. In one form or another, that claim pervades all of classical Judaism. It will be necessary here both to deny this claim and to affirm it. For some people, undoubtedly, the denial will go too far. It may be that the theological position outlined here will be too distant from the simple notion of revelation they had in childhood. Others may find the views expressed here too dangerously humanistic, not providing sufficient basis for the distinctive claims of Judaism, and especially for *halakhah*. For yet another group of readers, the affirmation will undoubtedly be too strong. The theological tone of the views I express may sound too much like the naive belief in revelation after all, dressed up in some fancy language. I proceed from the premise of seeking a mature and believable Jewish faith, based on an ultimate commitment to a nondualistic vision of the universe. I seek to remain faithful to an understanding that the "portrait of the king" is a mirror of the self and that each of our self-portraits is a mirror of the One. All the rest proceeds from there.

If revelation and commandment are the heart of Jewish faith,[6] they are also the most difficult and "scandalous" claim made by the religious traditions of Israel. Taken at face value, they form the very essence of Jewish

[6] For some background on the treatment of these key motifs in twentieth-century Jewish thought, the reader might want to consult the important essays of Paul Mendes-Flohr and Rivka Horwitz in *Jewish Spirituality*, vol. 2. The Horwitz essay is especially interesting in this context, showing that the key "dialogic" Jewish theologians of this century, Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, both tend toward mysticism in their discussions of revelation.

supernatural claims and seeming theological arbitrariness: God, the Creator of the universe, chooses at a particular moment in human history to be revealed uniquely to the Jewish people, addressing them in words and covenanting eternal loyalty to them if they will accept the divine will as manifest specifically in the practice of Judaism. Both mind and conscience reel at such a thought! What does it mean to say that God speaks? Is there, then, a divine voice, one that knows words, quite independent of language as a human creation? Does God speak to Israel in a language that Israel understands, commanding a Torah made up of laws, ethics, rites, and traditions that seem remarkably related to those of the particular age and society out of which Israel emerged? Does the Creator of the universe (or the One within and without) have a will so specific that it concerns itself with details of Sabbath observance, proper preparation of sacrifices, and all the rest that will comprise the great codes of Jewish law? Can we imagine a God so arbitrary as to choose one nation, one place, and one moment in human history in which the eternal divine will was to be manifest for all time? Why should the ongoing traditions, institutions, and prejudices of the western Semitic tribes of that era be visited on humanity as the basis for fulfilling the will of God? How can a God who visits only Israel deliver a message for all of humanity, especially for the more than half of humanity whose spiritual traditions have nothing to do with Sinai and its legacy? How can we attribute to Y-H-W-H, who is person only through our encounter, this sort of arbitrary willfulness? For these reasons and others, thinking Jews in our time, including many who seek a serious approach to questions of the spirit, balk at accepting the "yoke" of Sinai.

There are more than a few intimations in earlier Jewish literature telling us that we modern Jews are not the first to have difficulty with literal and dualistic views of revelation. A well-known midrash claims that God offered the Torah to each nation of the world, only to have it rejected, before coming to Israel.[7] Each nation sought to know what the Torah demanded before accepting it, and each found some reason to reject it. Only Israel said, *Na'aseh ve-nishma* (We will do and listen). Only Israel agreed to receive Torah out of love for God, even before they heard its contents. This story is an ancient apologetic for the exclusiveness of Israel's claim. We are not the "chosen people," says this midrash, but merely the only people who were willing to choose God's Torah. The idea that God has been revealed to other nations, at least in historical action, if not in words, was already apparent to the prophets, even if it tended to be forgotten in later Judaism.

[7] *Mekhilta Yitro, Ba-ḥodesh* 5 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, p. 221).

Human Understanding and Divine Speech

The *nature* of divine speech has also been debated by philosophers and theologians throughout Jewish history. Each of the great theologies proposed by Jews in both medieval and modem times offered some theory of prophecy or revelation. The prophet is often depicted as a philosopher or contemplative, one whose mind is so open that it reaches beyond the borders of ordinary human understanding. For Maimonides and those who followed him,[8] study and rigorous philosophic training were seen as part of the preparation necessary for the ultimate human experience. These serve to train consciousness, allowing the mind to expand in a way that enables it to receive the divine influx. When the intellectual and imaginative faculties are both fully attuned, a revelatory event is virtually assured.[9] The ecstatic mystics who followed in Maimonides' path[10] understood him to be saying that they, too, could achieve prophetic states, and they used various meditative techniques in hope of attaining prophecy.

In the mystical tradition, a variety of sources point to something beyond dualism. I have already referred to the ancient midrash that speaks of the seeker as being like an animal who wanders into the woods and finds a pond of water. Astonished, the animal looks down and sees "another" animal in the pond. All the prophets but Moses saw "through a darkened glass,"[11] explained by commentators as a glass with silvered backing, or a mirror.

[8] For a recent treatment of Maimonides' views of prophecy, see "Maimonides' View of Prophecy," H. Kreisel, p. 212.

[9] See A. Altmann, "Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas: Natural or Divine Prophecy?" in his *Essays in Jewish Intellectual History* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1981), pp. 99ff.

[10] See the important treatment of this theme in Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1988), and especially chapter three, which is vital background for the present treatment. The medievals reinterpreted biblical prophecy as an inner revelatory event resulting from patient training of the mind and rigorous contemplative discipline, phenomena that existed in their own day. In effect, the prophetic experience is thus reread as a mystical one, all modern distinctions between these (Heiler, etc.) notwithstanding. On mysticism as prophecy, compare Idel, ibid., pp. 138ff. For an earlier medieval attempt to distinguish mystical (*merkavah*) experience from prophecy, see Judah ben Barzilai, *Commentary to Sefer Yetsirah*, p. 22.

[11] *Yebamot* 49b; *Va-Yikra Rabbab* 1:14. See the extended discussions of this *aggadah* in Judah ben Barzilai, ibid., pp. 11ff. The view that this "darkened glass" is a mirror is seen by some as evidence of an ancient technique of acquiring knowledge, allegedly used by the prophets. This claim is made in the literature of Ashkenazic pietism in the thirteenth century. See *Ḥokhmat ha-Nefesh* (Lvov, 1876), 29c, and reference in *"Sefer ha-Navon,"* in J. Dan, *Studies in Ashkenazi-Hasidic Literature* ([in Hebrew]; Ramat Gan, Israel: Masada, 1975), p. 119. For a kabbalistic comparison of prophecy to seeing in a mirror, see Judah Hayyat's commentary to *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, ed. Mantua, 143a. This passage is quoted at length by Isaiah Horowitz of Prague in *Shney Luḥot ha-Brit* (Jerusalem, 1959; offset of ed. Warsaw), vol. 2, p. 133, and thus was known to later, including Hasidic, thinkers.

Prophetic revelation is the discovery of a deeper self.[12] Some sources attribute revelation to a "higher" aspect of soul or consciousness that remains "above" when the soul enters the person at birth. It is the prophet's "other self" that speaks through the prophet's mouth, the portion or aspect of the soul that remains one with God, even after the person has become differentiated. Notwithstanding formal declarations to the contrary, there were some among the kabbalists, as well as the philosophers, who thought they could re-create prophecy with proper inner training.[13]

Even the early rabbis, who are often depicted as quite literalist and naive in their views of revelation, offer us more than a few hints to the contrary. When Exodus 19:19 tells us that "Moses spoke and God responded in a voice," the rabbis add, "in the voice of Moses."[14] This seems to say that the *only* voice heard at Sinai was that of Moses,[15] sometimes speaking on his own, and sometimes possessed by the divine spirit. Rather than a "voice from heaven," there was the voice of a prophet transformed by an inner encounter that can only be characterized as "heaven." Thinking Jews over many centuries have debated how fully to refine the naive biblical depiction of Sinai and the experience of revelation.

The fact is that any sophisticated theory of revelation recognizes a moment in which the divine and human minds flow together and are not clearly separable from one another.[16] Indeed, we use the word "mind" of the divine whole only by analogy with its human part. If Y-H-W-H is the noncorporeal essence of the universe, and mind or soul is the noncorporeal essence of the person, we *call* God the mind or soul of the universe. But this is not to claim that the functions are identical. Divinity embraces both body and soul. The noncorporeal essence and its garb are all one as part of being. God as Y-H-W-H knows no distinction between matter and spirit.

[12] See G. Scholem's treatment of this theme in "Eine Kabbalistische Erklaerung. der Prophetie als Selbstbegegnung" in *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 74 (1930): 285ff., and in "Tselem: The Concept of the Astral Body," now translated in his *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead.*

[13] Cf. A.J. Heschel, "Did Maimonides Strive for Prophetic Inspiration?" in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume*, Hebrew Section (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945), pp. 159ff. On the recasting of biblical prophecy as mystical experience, see also the text by the Hasidic thinker Y.Y. Safrin, quoted by Idel in *Kabbalah*, p. 95 (322, n. 143).

[14] *Berakhot* 45a. I recognize that the Talmud, and especially *Tosafot* ad loc., understands this phrase somewhat differently.

[15] See Abraham Ibn Ezra's startlingly radical formulation: "For the speaker is a man and the hearer is a man." *Yesod Mora*, ed. Stern (Prague, 1833) chap. 12, 43a.

[16] This was true of both Aristotelian and neo-Platonic theories of prophecy in the Middle Ages. On the adaptation of both of these into Jewish mysticism, see Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 39ff.

But in seeking to comprehend revelation, we may speak of Y-H-W-H as cosmic mind, present in the depths of each human mind, and here impressing itself in a unique way upon consciousness. The universal One seeks out manifestation in the human, seeks to be known by this manifestation of its own self that is also, paradoxically its "other." Its "seeking," or its "calling out," to that "other" is not of language. It is only the human that can make the Divine articulate in words, since words themselves are a human invention. In fact, a more literal reading of Exodus 19:19 would render it, "Moses spoke and God responded *in thunder*," as the contemporary translations indicate. *Y-H-W-H speaks in thunderclaps; it takes a Moses to translate God's thunder into words.*[17]

If the Divine and human are regarded as separate in the Jewish imagination, God living in "heaven" and humans on earth, revelation is the act that most overcomes this separation. Moses goes up to the top of Sinai, according to the Torah, and God also comes down upon the mountain (Exodus 19:3, 20). But then the entire top of Sinai is covered by thick clouds—as though to say that the border between the "upper" and "lower" realms is lost at that moment. Later accounts of the revelation[18] are more fanciful and actually depict Moses as riding on the clouds, entering the heavenly realms, and holding on to God's Throne of Glory. Moses returns from the revelation still a human, but his face glows with the light of that encounter in which the uppermost limits of human spiritual attainment had been momentarily cast aside. He returns to the "world of separation" from an experience of transcendent unity, the Torah now "translated" within him. God's thunder and Moses' words are now one.

[17] A reversal of the passage just quoted from *Berakhot* 45a. Here, Moses is God's *meturgeman*, a relationship surely more to be expected than its opposite! Maimonides' *Guide* 2:33 makes it clear that only Moses is able to detect language within the divine revelation. The others hear but a sound or voice; it is Moses who translates that voice into human language for them. The essential debate about the nature of revelation is thus psychologized into a discussion of "What was the nature of Moses' inner process?" Is his perception of the "word" within that revelation better described as an "auditory" or a "conceptual" event? Does he "discover" the commandment within the overwhelming presence of God, or is it the transformation of his person in response to that presence that comes forth as commandment? This discussion receives its best modern articulation in Heschel's *The Prophets* and his *Torah min ha-Shamayim*, vol. 2, a part of his grand but unfinished attempt to establish biblical and rabbinic grounding for his own theology of revelation.

[18] See the many sources collected in L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 3, pp. 109ff. and notes.

The Inner Mountain

But the God who speaks in thunder is still the sky god, still the one who dwells in heaven and atop the highest peak. We are seeking a more fully *internalized* version of that foot-of-the-mountain experience. Earlier, we suggested turning the high mountain into a deep well. Using either of these metaphors (for the mountain, too, can exist within), we try to understand revelation as the most profound of inner experiences. Seen this way, Moses' experience has much in common with the creative act, the inner mental activity of the artist, the musical composer, the mathematician, and others, as well as with the religious figure. The core experience of creativity reaches a depth that necessarily contains an element of mystery. Creative people often describe this as a place within them where the concentration of inner energy allows the ordinary self to be overwhelmed and something "other" to take its place. We are talking about an inner straining of the human mind to the breaking point—but rather than a break*down* that leads to madness or confusion, we envision a break*through* that leads to new creative achievements. This may come in the form of an insight that did not exist before, a flash of intuition that is instantaneously translated into the medium in which the creator works: into music, into mathematical formula, into words. The creative energy, like the divine light, is undifferentiated. Only the tools and mind-set that lead one to that mysterious inner source cause one to draw upon it in one specific way and not another. (The rabbis say that at Sinai the very senses were confused, and Israel "saw the audible and heard the visible."[19] We can only imagine a state of creative elation from which Einstein would return with a symphony, and Beethoven with a mathematical formula!) *At this rung of human inner experience lines between "creativity," "discovery," "inspiration," and "revelation" are impossible to draw.* The language we have for drawing such fine distinctions belongs to the analytical mind, a level of consciousness very different than that at which these inner events occur. The broad vision and free flow of inner energies[20] that characterize such moments do not admit clear borders between "mine" and "Thine."

[19] *Mekhilta Yitro, Ba-ḥodesh* 9 (p. 235).

[20] No better description of that energy flow can be found than that present throughout the writings of Rav Kook. While Kook fully understands that prophecy and holy spirit are universal inward gifts, he seeks to maintain a different status for the revelation of Torah itself. This effort seems to me highly contrived, and Kook's broader views on the nature of Torah are the more attractive (and seemingly more authentically experience-based) aspects of his teaching.

When that stretching involves the soul, or the human capacity to love and tremble in awe, as well as the mind, the human capacity to understand, then the creative-inspirational-revelatory event takes on a religious character. It becomes a *life-transforming* event. Out of it may emerge a vision of a new or redeemed social order as well. The human striving for revelation involves a full extension of the emotional, intellectual, and moral life as one. We Jews assert that *Moshe Rabbenu* (our teacher Moses)—either historically or as a symbol of the ancient Jewish people—was a person who had such experience. The religion of ancient Israel, as embodied symbolically in that moment at Sinai, continues to represent for us the result of one of the great human encounters with divinity. For us as Jews—existentially speaking—it is the greatest such encounter of all time. Indeed, *it is the only one we know.* We understand that other such encounters may exist as well, and they may take different forms. We should have no need to deny their truth or the authenticity of their claims. On the contrary, we should *rejoice* at the notion that the divine voice has spoken many times and in many places. But these are not existentially open to us; they are not *ours.* True participation in a spiritual language requires the whole of the human heart. Each heart can speak only one such language. Our heart is given wholly to this one. While we recognize that there may be others, we cannot truly know them, in the sense that we cannot "set them upon our heart."

But what was the *content* of that moment at Sinai? If revelation is to be analogized to the experience of creativity or discovery, there needs to be a "something" that is revealed. What was it that Moses or Israel discovered, created, had revealed? Moses is the one who saw beyond the darkened glass, who looked into the brightness. What did he bring back from that indescribable moment? What was the great creative achievement or breakthrough in human awareness that resulted from the revelation that stands at Judaism's heart? All of Torah, in the broadest sense, may be called an ongoing, stammering, and always inadequate attempt to answer this question.

Out of Sinai comes Y-H-W-H, the reality and the word. Sinai offers Y-H-W-H[21] as the singular divine presence that pervades all the world and reaches beyond it in ways we humans are not given to fully understand. This reality, Sinai tells us, is accessible to human beings at the greatest moments

[21] The name is revealed to Moses at the burning bush, which the Midrash claims was at Mount Sinai (Horeb and Sinai are identified). The first of the ten commandments, said to be the root of all the positive commandments of the Torah, is a restatement of the divine name and the claim that it is the redeeming force.

of their lives. The same ecstatic presence that filled the hearts of Israel as they walked proudly out of Egypt, the same presence that so filled the Tent of Meeting that no person was able to enter it, could be found in human life, both for individuals and for the nation, again and again in the future. *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, "I shall be that I shall be," is interpreted by the rabbis to mean "I shall be with you again as I was with you then."[22] The manifestation of Y-H-W-H that happened in Israel's hearts and minds at Sinai is an assurance that such manifestation does not happen but once. Revelation reveals the *possibility* of revelation, not just that once, but whenever the human heart and mind are fully open to it. Israel further comes to understand that this presence that offers inspiration to be free (the revelation at the Sea) and guidance to the one who seeks it (the revelation at the Mountain) was there also before the existence of our world itself and will be there even after our world is gone. The name Y-H-W-H is the very core of this revelation, as bearer of the insight that God was-is-will be, containing all of time in eternal presence.

Torah as the Name of God[23]

In saying that the name of God is the core of revelation,[24] we are presenting a theology that is at once entirely traditional and highly radical. "I am Y-H-W-H," God says to Moses, "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El Shaddai, but by My name Y-H-W-H I was not known to them" (Exodus 6:2–3). The revelation to Moses begins with God's name, both in this passage and in the Ten Commandments. The kabbalists spoke of the entire Torah as the name of God,[25] or sometimes of the divine name as the essence of all language.

[22] *Sh'mot Rabbah* 3:6; *Berakhot* 9b.

[23] See the discussions by G. Scholem in "The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism," in his *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, pp. 32ff., and "The Name of God and the linguistic Theory of the Kabbala," in *Diogenes* 79 and 80 (1972).

[24] See the profound discussion of this and related matters in the essays of Walter Benjamin ("The Task of the Translator," in particular) and the conversations between Benjamin and his friend the young Gershom Scholem. There is much to be learned from the most interesting treatment by Susan Handelman in *Fragments of Redemption* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

[25] See the famous statement of this by Nahmanides in the introduction to his Torah commentary, quoted by Scholem in the former of the last-mentioned articles. On the relationship between Torah as name(s) of God, visionary experience, and contemplation of the *shi'ur komah* (the "bodily" form of God), see Idel, "The Concept of Torah in Heikhalot Literature and Its Metamorphoses in Kabbalah" (in Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish*

What is it, in fact, that was "spoken" by God to Israel at Sinai? Jewish tradition contains both maximalist and minimalist views[26] on this key question. The Bible's claim in this regard is fairly obvious: "Y-H-W-H spoke all these words, saying" is followed by the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1). But some of the early rabbis expand this claim vastly and include the entire Torah within the scope of revelation at the moment of Sinai. (They even discuss whether Moses at Sinai[27] wrote the last eight verses of Deuteronomy, beginning "Moses the servant of Y-H-W-H died there." Some admit that Joshua added these as a postscript, while others insist that Moses, hearing them spoken by God, wrote them down with his tears.) Their later followers expanded the claim even further, insisting that the Oral Torah (including Mishnah and Talmud) was from Sinai as well. The next expansion of this position was given voice in a saying attributed to Rabbi Joshua ben Levi: "Everything a faithful student is ever to say was already given to Moses at Sinai."[28] Here, the scope of revelation is broadened to infinity, encompassing within it (and thus granting legitimacy to) every proper interpretation of Torah to be offered down to the end of time. The final maximalist view is that of the *Zohar*: "There is *nothing* that has not been hinted at in the Torah."[29]

Thus far we have the view of the maximalists. But there is also a minimalist reading on the question of what was said and heard at Sinai, claiming less than the Bible's Ten Commandments, rather than more. One midrash claims that Israel in fact heard only two commandments out of

Thought 1 (1981): 23ff. See especially the passage from Gikatilla quoted on p. 61, where the name Y-H-W-H represents God stripped of all garments, the externals of Torah. The Hasidic masters were influenced by passages like this and go the further (or perhaps less precise) step of including the phenomenal world among the "garments" of God, which need to be stripped away in the highest moments of religious perception.

[26] The same terms are used by my teacher David Weiss Halivni, "On Man's Role in Revelation," in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, ed. J. Neusner et al. (Atlanta: Scholars' Press, 1989), vol. 2, pp. 29ff. Halivni uses the categories somewhat differently, as he is examining only rabbinic sources, whereas I am ranging more widely through the history of Judaism. Of course, the rabbinical aspect of this discussion is all based on A.J. Heschel's *Torah min ha-Shamayim*, vol. 2, especially pp. 264ff. The implication of Heschel's work, though not clearly stated by him, is that *Torah mi-Sinai* is a dogmatic misstatement of what was originally a mystical or apocalyptic vision, in which the entire history of Torah was encapsulated in a single moment.

[27] See Heschel, ibid., pp. 381ff.

[28] *Talmud Yerushalmi Pe'ah* 2:6 (17a). Cf. Heschel, *Torah min ha-Shamayim*, vol. 2, pp. 234ff.

[29] *Zohar* 3:221a and freq., based on *Ta'anit* 9a.

the mouth of the divine Dynamis[30]—"I am Y-H-W-H your God," and "You shall have no other gods beside Me"—when they interrupted the revelation out of their great fear. It was at this point that they said to Moses, "You speak with us and we will listen, but let not Y-H-W-H speak with us, lest we die" (Exodus 20:16). This would mean that all the rest of revelation comes to Israel through the mind as well as the mouth of the prophet, shaped by his own translator's imagination, and only these two utterances are, in the fullest sense, the "word of God." Here, awareness of Y-H-W-H and the prohibition of idolatry in all its forms are described as the basis of Judaism. The philosopher Franz Rosenzweig[31] apparently at one point considered a still more restricted formulation, debating whether God had spoken even the first *word* of the commandments ("I am"). All the rest is Israel's commentary, elaboration, and response. Another radically minimalist view[32] is to be found in the teachings of a Hasidic master. This view has God speaking only the first *letter* of the first word. That letter, *aleph*, is by itself silent. God speaks only the great silence; the Divine is a silent womb that contains all of language within it.

In seeing the name as the content of revelation, we draw together the maximalist and minimalist views as ends of a circle. *All God says is that which cannot be spoken, the pronouncement of the unpronounceable word.* But this word is filled to overflowing with the energy of Being. It contains within it all the power of Creation that it bore when it was first spoken as *yehi* (let there be). Thus it allows us to bring *all words* to Sinai. Revelation is that which makes for *leshon ha-kodesh:* it allows for the sanctification of human speech. The name is the divine Self in the form of language; that which Y-H-W-H "gives" at Sinai is nothing other than Y-H-W-H, for "the blessed Holy One and Torah are One."[33] This is the truth of Sinai as I understand it. To this indeed all else is commentary and response.

[30] *Pesikta Rabbati* 22 (ed. Ish Shalom, p. 111a); *Shir Rabbath* 1:2; *Makkot* 24a; etc. For the view that all ten commandments were heard spoken by God, see ed. Horowitz-Rabin *Mekhilta Yitro, Ba-ḥodesh* 9, p. 237.

[31] Rosenzweig, "The Commandments: Divine or Human," included in his *On Jewish Learning* (New York: Schocken Books, 1955). See the discussion by Rivka Horwitz in *Jewish Spirituality*, vol. 2, pp. 358ff.

[32] This view, attributed to Rabbi Mendel of Rymanow, is stated somewhat equivocally in the two collections of his teachings. See *Torat Menaḥem, Yitro* (ed. Lvov, 1877, 3a), and *Menaḥem Ziyyon* (Bartfeld, 1904, 41a). It is clearly understood this way, however, by R. Mendel's disciple R. Naftali of Ropszyce in his *Zera' Qodesh* (Jerusalem, 1971), vol. 2, 40b. Cf. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, pp. 29ff.

[33] A widely quoted statement in Hasidic sources, attributed to the *Zohar* but actually of later origin. See I. Tishby in *Kirjath Sefer* 50 (1975): 480–492.

Nothing "new" is given to Israel at Sinai. Torah, after all, is said to be the most ancient wisdom, that which dwelt with God before the world's Creation. The message of Sinai, that the One is ever present and potentially manifest in every creature and in each moment, is also not a new truth. God's presence, as we have said, is imprinted in all of being through the divine utterances by which the world came to be. What is new at Sinai is that God can be approached and apprehended through language and the conceptual structures that proceed from it. The single divine Word may now fill all the many words of human speech, just as the divine One is present in the infinitely varied forms of being.

Revelation and the Inward Journey

This claim for a point of inner contact between human mind and universal Self is in need of yet another set of quotation marks, which the reader will note are being used so generously at this point in our discussion. The word "between" also needs this designation, for the true nature of the mind's encounter with the One is not to be seen as a meeting of "self" and "Other." The human-Divine encounter *is more like the breaking down of a wall*[34] *than like the building of a bridge.* It is a discovery that there is no chasm, rather than a claim that the gap can be traversed. Finally, it is the realization that the wall itself was illusory, and the sense of separation lies only in our own unreadiness to uncover the deeper truth.

It is not for Moses alone that we make this claim.[35] The Judaism of today's seeker is not that of one who stands faithfully at the base of the mountain (or the edge of the well!), waiting for the leader to return and proclaim the divine message. It is, rather, a Judaism that seeks to go *with* Moses—or Akiva,[36] who is seen by the tradition as a latter-day heavenly

[34] See the text from *Otsar Ḥayyim*, quoted by Idel in *Kabbalah*, p. 67 and p. 306, n. 69.

[35] See *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef* 74a (on "You shall be holy"), quoted by S. Dresner, *The Zaddik* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 276, n. 23.

[36] A contemporary Jewish spirituality would do well to reclaim this figure of Akiva, a nonprophet who lived in "ordinary" historic time, who nevertheless "went in and came out in peace" and had "things revealed" to him "that had not been revealed to Moses" (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 4). Interestingly, of the variants on the *Pardes* tale (*Ḥagigah* 15a and parallels), some say "went up and came down in peace," whereas others refer to "in" and "out." See the Jerusalem Talmud version in Ḥagigah 2:1 (77b) as well as the Erfurt manuscript of the *Tosefta*, ed. Lieberman, p. 381. An interesting example of the interchangeability of the vertical and internal metaphors! With regard to Akiva's "journey," the gaonic commentators are already willing to concede that he went nowhere in the "geographical" sense, but that the entire experience took place "within the chambers of his heart." See the

voyager—to those heights or depths, and to participate in Israel's ongoing attempt to articulate that encounter.

But our claim goes still farther. *Every* human journey contains within it something of Moses' trek up that mountainside; every human attempt at making meaning, at understanding the purpose of human existence, at rejecting cynicism in a quest of truth, has something of Sinai within it. Whenever we assert—by deed as well as by word—that life is not absurd, that accident and emptiness are not our only lot, we are climbing up God's mountain. Believe as we may that it is we who are making life's meaning, we who are retrieving human dignity from the abyss of chaos, the religious mind sees such activity as *response* rather than as human creativity alone. We give meaning all its forms, but the need to do so is an act of responding to the divine image cast into our deepest human selves. The inner voice that calls us to this religious creativity is the voice of God. We perform the act of naming, calling the Divine by the names chosen by our tradition. But that need to name exists in us because we are called upon to do so by the One within.

We further assert that all of us Jews, in all generations, as the story says, are there with Moses, or—to say it in somewhat less mythical terms—the Jewish people there made an all-time commitment, a covenant to remain faithful forever to the reality of that moment. Each of us, as we lay claim to our spiritual heritage, may return to intimate communion with that ever-resounding event at Sinai, formative of the Jewish spirit for all generations. It is in this sense that I understand the covenantal aspect of Sinai and of Judaism as a whole.

The Role of Covenant: A Reinterpretation

The God-initiated covenant of the Bible, a pillar of classical Judaism's self-understanding, cries out for reinterpretation in our day. In a Jewish faith where God is not "wholly other," and where the "will" of God is far from a simple notion, "covenant" cannot be understood in its most obvious sense. The religious language we have inherited speaks of a God who chooses Israel from among all nations to receive the single revelation as manifest in Torah. It is God's "election of Israel," to use the classic term, that initiates the covenant. But God as *chooser* is a highly anthropomorphized

comment of R. Ḥananel (as opposed to that of RaSHI), ad loc. We, of course, understand the "ascent" of Moses in the same way.

notion of Y-H-W-H. Once we see the very depiction of God as person to be the result of human projection onto the universe, divine choosing will also have to be recognized as projection, as Israel's way of asserting that it stands as a people in a unique relationship with the Divine.

It is *we* who make this covenant,[37] we who, in the person of Moses, dash half the blood of a sacramental offering over the altar—representing God—and pour the other half over ourselves, binding ourselves in an act of eternal commitment to the One of Sinai. In doing so, the Jewish people perform an act of eternal living commitment, forging a link between this event and all Jewish generations to come. It is in this sense that we continue to speak of Sinai as covenant. It is we who at Sinai declare our undying devotion to the universal ever-flowing and yet unchanging One.

Is the covenant, then, a one-sided affair? What does covenant mean if there are not two partners between whom the commitment is made? Here again, the religious language we speak—that of "self" and "Other"—has to be read anew in the light of our nondualistic point of view. If relationship with God is more like breaking down a wall (or seeing through a veil) than it is like building a bridge across a chasm, covenant, too, becomes a commitment to *keeping faith with the deepest Self that is manifest within us.* It is a decision to live in such a way that allows this One to be revealed to others through us. Covenant is our willingness to be a channel,[38] to serve as a conduit of God's presence to those with whom we live. "Israel exists in order to open paths, to light up the ways, and to kindle lamps—to raise everything up, so that all be One."[39]

Once again, we may read our projection of covenant "from God's point of view" as well. The divine light extends to all peoples, as it does to each individual soul. Israel has made the commitment of devoting itself to that light and bringing it into the world, making itself and its history a channel for divine presence. The choice to do so may be Israel's, but this act of self-dedication (that the Jewish people has called "choosing") may still be seen as one from which Y-H-W-H is by no means absent. Is it not the God within us who chooses to hear the voice of God?[40] Is the voice of Israel that says

37. See Exodus 24, the covenant of Sinai. Note that this act is Moses' own initiative.

38. The image of the Jew as a channel for divine blessing into the world is widespread in Hasidism. This is the main Hasidic understanding of the special role of Israel in the world, that is, the covenant. Israel among the nations, like the *tsaddik* within Israel, represents the *berit* as channel of connection to God.

39. *Zohar* 2:181b.

40. See *Kedushat Levi, Yitro* (ed. Jerusalem, 1958), 138b. See also the passage by Dov Baer of Myzedyrzec quoted by Rivka Schatz in *Hasidism as Mysticism: Quietistic Elements in 18th*

na'aseh ve-nishma (We will do and listen) not also one in which Y-H-W-H is speaking?

Torah's narrative of the events at Sinai is famously nonsequential. Even the account given in the main source, Exodus 19–20, is hard to keep in order. When we add to it the parallel tales in Exodus 24 and Deuteronomy 4–6, we find a total jumble. The tale of Sinai is presented by the biblical text staccato, as a series of still photographs, rather than as a running film. You hold the snapshots in your hand and try to find their proper order. The ancient rabbis already engaged in this process, determining that Israel's proclamation "We shall do and we shall obey" (Exodus 24:7) preceded the divine revelation. If that is the case, however, we acknowledge that our testimony to Sinai is entirely subjective, the witness of those who were already covenanted to the event before it happened. Would there have been a Sinai without our prior covenant, that act by which we opened our hearts to it? A divine voice, the rabbis tell us, goes forth from Sinai every day, calling us to turn to God. Perhaps it was only that same voice, the divine wind and thunder of Sinai, that went forth on that famous sixth of Sivan. But on that day our hearts were open, we declared ourselves ready. That was the day when wind and thunder were transformed into revelation, because we were there to listen.

The task of religion is twofold. To return for a moment to the vertical metaphor, we could say that religion has both to take us to the heights of human attainment and to raise up the valleys that lie between them, to make for peak moments in our lives, but also to ensure that we do not sink too low when those special moments seem far from us. Religion is both charismatic and institutional, to say it in other words. Its language coaxes forth in us those peak experiences that become the core of the individual's and the community's commitments. But the other no less serious, and perhaps more difficult, task of religion is building institutions that will allow us to shape the rest of our lives in faithfulness to those singularly blessed moments.[41] *Le-ma'an tizkeru*, "so that you remember," is the way we say this in Hebrew, and it is the basis for all of form in religion. In youth, we are impatient with religion for being overly institutional and not leaving

Century Hasidic Thought (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 191, as well as other sources quoted in that chapter (8).

[41] I first wrote about this subject more than thirty years ago in a little essay called "Toward a Theology of Jewish Spirituality," first published in *Worship* (1971) and reprinted in J. Sleeper and A. Mintz, *The New Jews* (New York: Vintage Press, 1971). In those days, I was highly impatient—like a good twenty-seven-year-old in 1968—with the institutional side of religion.

enough room for the pure freedom that seems to be required by the spiritual energy churning within us. As we mature, we come to understand that religion faces the great task of uplifting *ordinary* life, the realms of work, family, and humdrum existence, of bringing these, too, into the spectrum of spiritual awareness. Only the discipline provided by institutional structure (dare I say "*halakhah*"?) can perform that task.

The Jewish people throughout its history has accepted the task of forming a *communal* religious existence and creating a *civilization* that stands in response to the event at Sinai. This is what I mean by *kabbalat ha-Torah*, "accepting the Torah." What we accept is the reality that divinity is present to humans, in human language and in human institutions, and the challenge is to create a society that embodies this presence. We are no less charged with that task today than we were thousands of years ago. For this reason, the civilization the Jewish people creates in this act of response, by the very definition of its task, has to evolve continually.[42] The nature of standing in God's presence—in this generation after the Holocaust, in this generation of nuclear weapons and threats of terror, and in this generation of threatened ecological disaster—is clearly different from the task of standing in God's presence in the shtetl a hundred years ago or in Erets Yisra'el in ancient times. As the nature of that task changes, the way the Jewish people responds must continually grow and change. In an age when religion itself has again become the source of grave threats to stability and civilization, the universalist, humanitarian reading of sacred traditions becomes an urgent moral need.

Revelation and Torah

Our written Torah represents the Jewish people's first attempt to create such a civilization. In it, we made our first transition from wordless revelation, through prophetic speech, to the creation of a holy society, from the

[42] Mordecai Kaplan's evolutionary model for Jewish civilization, including both *halakhah* and *aggadah* in their fullest cultural sense, is theologically vital to me. It is quite fully integrated with my neo-kabbalistic theology. If the true core of revelation is the name of God, Torah becomes a "garment" that embodies the name. There is good kabbalistic precedent for this view (see the previous reference to Idel, "The Concept of Torah," as well as the treatment by Dorit Cohen-Alloro in *The Secret of Garment in the Zohar* [in Hebrew], pp. 45ff.). I differ from the orthodox kabbalist in my insistence that it is we Israelites who, through our love and devotion, weave even that Torah garment (and not only our own soul garments). The name is divine; the garb in which it is contained is human-Divine. Therefore, the garb must evolve as humanity evolves, or else one is left with a relic, rather than an organic garment that "fits" the name of Y-H-W-H in our day.

stillness and passivity of becoming aware to the realization and embodiment of that awareness in social form. As such, Torah is the basis of all further attempts. I look upon it not as the specifically revealed will of God, and not as a body of binding legislation, but rather as the ancient and powerful root of our people's ongoing sacred task of building a religious civilization. It is the firm foundation of all that comes in its wake. Certainly, it still has a *hold* upon us: not a binding hold of law, but a hold the way one's deepest and most ancient psyche continues to have a powerful grasp on a person's actions throughout life. The Torah represents the psychic source from which we all come. We respond to it in deep and personal ways. That response includes love and deep loyalty; at times it may also include rebellion or anger. But Torah, all of Torah, is present throughout the continuing evolution of Judaism. All of Judaism is an ongoing project of commentary, each generation's struggle with reinterpreting Torah.

But this explanation of the relationship between revelation and Torah, a wordless or nearly wordless revelation to which Torah is Israel's historic human response, does not seem quite adequate. Are the words and religious institutions of Torah, then, *only* human? Would we say *merely* human?[43] Is there no divine presence about them? Let us remember once again that we are operating in a universe where the lines between the Divine and the human are less than rigid. Can we not say that the *tselem Elohim*, "the image of God," is reflected in the religious institutions that human beings create? If we are a part of divinity and bear its presence within us, the Jewish people (or any other religious community) over centuries has the power to sanctify, which is to say "bring the divine presence into," the essential forms of its religious life for all its descendants. Could this be what Mordecai Kaplan meant when he spoke of the mitzvot as *sancta* of the Jewish people? The essential forms of tradition are indeed holy and must be followed, not because God dictated them from the mountaintop, but because the Jewish people, using its own sacred energy, declared them holy to its God. This is reflected in the language of our holiday blessings: *mekadesh Yisra'el ve...*, "sanctifying Israel and...."[44] The sanctification of the holiday depends upon and comes about through the holiness of Israel. I would apply this model to the entirety of our religious expression.

[43] Cf. Rosenzweig's posing of the question: "Can we really draw so rigid a boundary between what is divine and what is human?" Compare his essay, "The Commandments: Divine or Human," p. 119.

[44] See *Betzah* 17a and RaSHI, ad loc.

To say it somewhat differently, and perhaps more mystically, I offer the following. The Jewish people has invested the forms of its devotional life, including the words of prayer, the cycle of the calendar, its sacred music, and even tales and commentaries that have been told and retold, with boundless emotional and spiritual energy over many generations. I believe that the power of this *kavvanah* is never lost. The intensity with which a form is used as a vessel of spiritual life grows and builds through each generation of devotion to it. The treasury of spiritual riches borne by the words of prayer or the form of offering gains in ever-increasing richness over time. A latter-day Jew, especially one coming from outside the tradition, who opens to that form, may discover the tremendous riches of *kavvanah* that lie waiting within it. The Jewish people has both created and accepted these forms in love. That love is neither lost nor diminished by the passage of time, but it is hidden only until we discover it again. The forms may not have been *given* by God at Sinai, but they are *what we bring to the mountain*; we invest them and forever associate them with the holiness we encounter there.

Of course, the dangers of institutional religion are also ever present. Overinstitutionalization can indeed block out the transcendent and mysterious core experience that the form was created to preserve. There are those who become loyal to the forms alone. Traditional Judaism contains within it a preoccupation with the detail of form that is truly overwhelming. Surely there have always been those for whom this preoccupation serves as a positive reminder of the true content. But over the centuries, as this ever-extending passion for correct performance in each detail has been allowed to run rampant, Judaism for many has become a religion of devotion to performance, or commitment to religious law, that stands in great danger of forgetting its own spiritual center. The early Hasidic masters certainly knew this, and overemphasis on institutional religion, rather than on its sacred core, was what the Hasidic revival set out to correct. As Hasidism felt the need to take on the mantle of defending tradition, the character of Hasidism changed. It, too, became overly devoted to the protection of outward form, including the specific outward form of Hasidic tradition. The tension between *keva* and *kavvanah*, fixed form and inner content, is an ongoing struggle within Judaism, as it is in traditional religions throughout the world.

Revelation, Will, and Law

What room does such a view of revelation and its relationship with mitzvah leave for the role of law in Judaism? The content of revelation is the divine name or Self, the personal face of Being. This may be spiritually fulfilling, but we seem to be left quite entirely without a notion of specific divine will. Is it not the will of God that has always served as the theological underpinning for the authority of Jewish law? We understand that *halakhah* properly means "the path" and that "law" is a somewhat unfortunate mistranslation. But the codification of human behavior into categories of "permitted" and "forbidden" in accord with the will of God is surely highly characteristic of classical Judaism and remains the dividing line between Orthodoxy and all non-Orthodox forms of Judaism in our day.

This description of our situation is to a large degree accurate; the theology offered here is clearly that of a non-Orthodox Jew. What you are reading is a heterodox mystical theology of Judaism. I do indeed see a divine intent or will in the life force, as manifest in the evolutionary process, and especially in the ongoing striving toward consciousness.[45] This is not "will" in the highly personalistic sense, but a striving inherent in the very existence and evolution of the universe. Our human response to (or participation in!) this "will" is to be found in the affirmation of life, in recognizing the divine image in ourselves and in others, in acts of kindness—primarily in the human community but embracing all living creatures—and in the nurturing of awareness. This response requires human societies to create such forms, including legal institutions, domestic arrangements, and so forth, that will embody this will. The same is true of forms of worship and religious discipline. If awareness of the One is to be cultivated in the human community, ordered forms of spiritual expression will have to exist. In this sense, we may say that religion is *our human fulfillment of the divine will or purpose.* The need for human societies to create religious forms is rooted, in this sense, in "the will of God" or the desire of the One for balanced and lasting self-manifestation. In another way, I also believe that *teshuvah*, the turning of all things toward their root in God, may be seen as a reflection of divine will in the creaturely world.[46] The turning of all things toward their

[45] For a parallel to this understanding of divine will, see Ish-Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak ha-Kohen Kook*, pp. 68ff., and sources quoted in n. 203.

[46] See the discussion by Meshullam Feibush Heller of Zbarash in *Likkutim Yekarim* (Jerusalem, 1974), p. 137b. This precedes, and may be a source for, the well-known views

source in the One is rooted in existence itself. We will discuss this further in the coming chapter.

I recognize that none of this quite gets us to the point of explicit divine authority for the specific forms created by the Jewish people. In this gap lies the unorthodoxy of my position. To be sure, we Jews believe in the importance of law in the conduct of human life. When it comes to those areas governed by civil and criminal codes, Judaism stands firmly for the notion of the rule of law, with or without the convention of divine origin. Our questions about law refer primarily to the appropriateness of legal categories to the sphere of worship or religious devotion, but do not touch the importance or value of law itself. I do not know a God who "commands" specific religious behavior or forms of worship. I also believe that our way of response to the Divine within the universe needs to grow and evolve with our history. But it is also clear to me that my very recognition of the divine image in my fellow human, and the need to sustain that recognition (even in his, her, or my least elevated moments), will take us right back to the need for law in the conduct of human affairs.

One of the earliest and most interesting exponents of the Torah, but whose work was lost to Jews for many centuries, is the philosopher Philo of Alexandria. Writing in Greek just over two thousand years ago, Philo was the first to attempt to understand the Torah traditions in terms of Greek categories of thought. Philo speaks of a notion of natural law, an eternal way of wisdom that teaches humans how to live in harmony with the natural world. This law, he says, was known to the ancients. Philo claims, as do the later rabbis, that Abraham observed God's law before the Torah was given.[47] But for the philosopher this means that the law our patriarch followed was in fact the natural law of the universe. It was his own inner wisdom that taught him to live in harmony with the universe. This affinity for natural law was the "original" Judaism. The Torah as we have it is Israel's attempt (Philo would say Moses' attempt) to approximate this natural law by means of human legislation. The Torah contains within it such important measures as protection for the weak, humane treatment of animals,

of Rav Kook, to be discussed later. On this author and his place in the history of Jewish devotional literature, see the treatment by my student Miles Krassen, *Uniter of Heaven and Earth: Rabbi Meshullam Feibush Heller of Zbarazh and the Rise of Hasidism in Eastern Galicia* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998). Krassen also offers there an important general discussion of *devekut* and mystical union in the Hasidic sources.

[47] Or so both Philo and the rabbis read Genesis 26:5. See my brief treatment of the Hellenic materials in my *Devotion and Commandment: The Faith of Abraham in the Hasidic Imagination*, pp. 24ff., and the sources quoted there.

and regard for the natural environment. The Torah lends us a sense of responsibility for ourselves, our families, and especially those less fortunate than we are. It repeats the law of nature "in human language." Torah is a way of bringing us to live in harmony with God's own law.

Rabbinic Judaism also contains within it an ancient principle that is quite close to the notion of natural law. According to the rabbis, seven commandments were given to the children of Noah after the flood. These include the prohibitions against murder, incest and adultery, theft, idolatry, and blasphemy; the injunction to establish, courts of justice; and the injunction against dismemberment of living animals for food. These universal moral commandments are incumbent upon all human individuals and societies.[48] With the latitude of interpretation and extension offered by our tradition, I believe we could continue to support the notion of the seven Noahide commandments as a basis for universal morality.

There is no question that the written Torah was a document of progressive social legislation in its time, as it was also one of great spiritual and moral insight. The rabbis continued in this evolution of Torah, adding such refinements as the virtual abolition of the death penalty, the protection of women in divorce, the replacement of blood retribution by the payment of damages, and countless other refinements of moral legislation. This process remains for us paradigmatic of that which we need to create. For us Jews in the Diaspora, the promulgation of humane legislation is generally something we do as members of the general society, however inspired by our Judaism. In the creation of a Jewish society in Israel, the Jewish people is given the tremendous opportunity and challenge of creating a legal system and a moral code that reflect both its roots in the prior history of Judaism and the best of contemporary moral sensibilities. This is not an easy task, as witnessed by the constant struggles in Israel over the place of Jewish law in the legal and institutional life of that society.

Judaism in its next manifestation will continue to need *halakhah.* This is simply to say that Judaism, like any religious tradition, will have to be defined and recognizable by forms of praxis and cannot afford to let itself be dissipated into proclamation of theological or moral vagaries alone. Although it will not be justified as divine will in the literal sense, this *halakhah* can become the bearer of divine presence, the *davar shebi-kedushah*, in our lives. This new *halakhah*, rather than viewed as the specific will of

[48] On the Noahide laws and their implications, see David Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: An Historical and Constructive Study of the Noahide Laws* (New York: Edward Mellen Press, 1983).

God, will be understood as a human-Divine embodiment, created by Israel, but in which real holiness is contained. Form as bearer of mysterious content, the outer as the needed vehicle to contain and convey the inner, will remain a vital part of Judaism in the future, as it has been in the past. Our understanding of the relationship between outer and inner may shift, and we may come to describe the origins of our sacred forms in new ways. But the need for them remains no less real than it has ever been.

In the preceding chapter, we discussed some areas of this old-new *halakhah* as it relates to a theology of Creation. As we turn to do the same for revelation, I recognize the vast difference between my approach and most traditional ones. In the past, the entirety of Torah and the commandments were linked to revelation. Whatever other reasons or meanings might be found in the mitzvot, there was an ultimate ground in Judaism that demanded they all be fulfilled because they are the Creator's will. This is where all modern non-Orthodox Judaisms seriously diverge from their classical antecedents. Still, I believe there are specific halakhic implications to our faith in Sinai and revelation that I have articulated here, as there are to our faith in Creation, and indeed to many other tales that we bear as Jews and tell from one generation to the next.

The Personal Path: Accepting the Yoke

The relationship between the memory of Sinai and our ever-evolving religious lives as Jews is not a simple one. There *is* divinity to be discovered within the mitzvot, but this is not the divinity of a commanding God who insists on the details of their proper performance. Judaism *is* a way of reaching inward and outward toward the One, inward toward the heart and outward in manifestation through the mitzvot. This way is sanctified by the generations of those who walked along the path, rather than by the fiat of an overpowering transcendent deity. The light that lies hidden within our Torah, made up of the countless points of love and devotion discovered and placed there by our ancestors, is *or ha-ganuz*, "the hidden light" of Y-H-W-H.

Is it then *imperative* that Jews seek out this light? Does the God who has dwelt within the hearts of so many generations, and who is given expression through these forms, become an immanent *metsaveh*, a "commanding One," who will stand behind the mitzvot as the indwelling embodiment of religious authority? I often find myself close to this position, but I have some strong resistance to it as well.

In my own religious life, I have come to recognize the need for *submission* to God as a part of religious devotion. I continue to struggle with this aspect of religious life, but I know the vital role it plays in the spiritual path. I accept that there is no room for God—however defined—in our lives until we can overcome our own willfulness, stubbornness, egotism. To thus submit, to "negate your will before God's will,"[49] is essential to accepting the covenant as I have described it, the readiness to serve as a channel for divine presence in the world.

In Judaism, this submission, usually described as *kabbalat ol malkhut shamayim* (accepting the yoke of divine rule), is joined to *kabbalat ol mitzvot* (accepting the yoke of commandments). I recognize the value of this link, the sense that religious awareness becomes constant in life only through the regularity of religious discipline. But I also remain constantly aware of the pitfalls of submission as a religious value. I am suspicious of the desire to surrender to halakhic authority as a road to escape from the difficulties of life in our era of exceptional human freedom and nearly limitless choices. There is a surrender to religious authority or tradition that replaces, and masks itself as, true surrender to God's presence. The discovery of God is cause for exultation and joy—"I rejoice over Your word as one who finds a great treasure" (Psalm 119:162). Too often that joy is lost in excessive concern for details, for proper performance, for pleasing the sources of authority. I have traveled that road and found it a blind alley. Today I tend rather to value freedom and do not surrender it lightly. In this sense, I very much feel myself a creature of the modern world, my religious longings pushing me toward a spiritual postmodernity, but not back toward the premodern models of authority. I have fought hard for the measure of freedom I have in my life—including the freedom from religious guilt—and I am not prepared to surrender it, even for the great good of regular religious discipline.

Herein lies the deep non-Orthodoxy of my religious life. I know of the human role in the origin of the commandments, and I know that all human creations are fallible. This knowledge provides a rationale for my refusal to hand myself over entirely to the *halakhah*, which is not the same as giving myself to God. The truth is that I want to hold fast to both freedom and religious authenticity. I will freely decide—often, but not consistently—to live a rather traditional Jewish life, but it is vital to me that I am the one making that decision. I know that the mitzvot are but a means, and an often arbitrary one, to the greater end of spiritual awareness. Out of my love for our

[49] *Mishnah Avot* 2:4.

ancestors and the divine spirit that dwelt within them, I mostly choose to live in faithfulness to the religious discipline they created. Each day I seek to affirm anew my commitment to the mitzvot as my religious language, to keep this an act of faith ever chosen in freedom. I, too, must cross the Sea each day, leaving Egypt and coining into freedom, before I can renew the covenant.

What, then, becomes of submission? How do I distinguish willfulness from the need for freedom? Am I honestly seeking to be free in order to reach a higher rung of religious discovery, to submit to God's presence rather than to tradition, or am I simply seeking justification for a life of what the halakhist would dismiss as "enlightened hedonism"? How will I know the difference? Is there any place for absolutes in the world of religious behavior? Is the ability to say "No" to ourselves not an important value?

Let us remember that we are not talking about the ethical or interpersonal sphere, where I certainly do believe in the values of both law and self-restraint. We are considering here the sphere of pure religious behavior, the realm called by tradition "the commandments between person and God." Here I am committed to a position that maximalizes individual freedom. My absolutes in this realm are rather few, and it is I who have chosen them. I demand of myself that I stare daily into the face of the tradition, doing so with knowledge and respect. The options of observance and nonobservance are always before me. The choices I make are my own; only the God who dwells within my heart knows how wisely or not I have chosen.

I am helped in this struggle with authority in religion by the very *helplessness* of God. The One who is present in these mitzvot is really no longer the frightening commander on the mountaintop. I thank the ever self-revealing Y-H-W-H for the gifts of biblical scholarship and historical study of religion that have helped break the excessive yoke of that sort of religious authority, making our generation a post- rather than a premodern one. The God I know is a divinity that cannot act or be realized in the human world at all, except through human actions. In the ethical/moral sphere of religious living, "the commandments between person and person," I find myself guided by traditional Jewish values and concerns, with a few prominent but significant exceptions.[50] In the realm of personal religious expression, knowing full well that I live in an age of choice and freedom, I mostly

[50] These cover mostly matters surrounding gender and sexuality, including a full commitment to gender egalitarianism and rejection of the traditional reading of Leviticus 18:22 as prohibiting sexual activity between men. It is time that we sanctify loving same-sex relationships rather than pretending that they do not exist.

choose to remain "at home" with the life rhythms of the Jewish people. In doing so, I let myself hear that pleading voice of the One that has so long inhabited these traditions and asks not to be abandoned by yet another one of Israel's children.

Sinai and Languge

In turning to the more specific *halakhah* of revelation, we are asking: "To what does the presence of Y-H-W-H in language obligate us?" What claim is made on our lives by this connection between the Divine and the verbal, by this drawing forth of the hidden *yod* into the *vav* of speech? What demand upon us is made by the specific form taken by our tale, that of the people standing before God at Sinai?

The claim that divinity can enter human language, or that the indescribable One of Being, utterly beyond words and language, enters into human speech through the agency of the word Y-H-W-H, is both to elevate human language itself to a new level of respect and to make tremendous demands upon it. It grants that language can, after all, transcend itself and serve as a vehicle for articulating states of consciousness and levels of reality that seem beyond its ken. The word Y-H-W-H is here seen as a token of the promise that language can be reborn in symbolic form, ready to embody heights and depths unknown to its prior ordinary discursive state.

The ability of language to reach into the human soul in such a way is both powerful and dangerous. The past century has seen too much of the abuse of myth and symbol as means of control over others for us to regard such claims for language benignly. If we assert that language has such power, this assertion must immediately be accompanied by a statement of commitment to what our sages called *brit ha-lashon*, "the covenant of the tongue,"[51] that is attributed precisely to Sinai. The memory of Sinai demands of us that we use language in pure and sacred ways: that its powers not be used to manipulate or to pervert the truth. We must not use language to set one human community and its symbols over another, doing to others what was so long done to us. We must especially remain ever aware that the same power of language that brings us to the gates of divinity has been used to

[51] The phrase goes back to *Sefer Yetsirah*, which sees this covenant and that of the flesh or sexuality (*brit ha-ma'or*) juxtaposed to one another. Speech and sexuality are parallel areas of human expression; both need to be guarded by covenantal purity.

dehumanize and bring whole peoples (including ourselves) to the gates of hell. Language must be used to bring us back to the One.

In our daily lives as well, we must come to understand that language is a precious and sacred vessel. Its power to draw us together in community—especially through sharing the language of prayer—is great. So too is its power of destruction. Malicious talk divides people from one another so deeply that the rabbis compare it to the shedding of blood. To know Y-H-W-H as Torah is to know the power of words and to devote ourselves to *taharat ha-lashon*, to the purity of language.

This faith in the potency of language, expressed in our opening to Y-H-W-H in revelation, carries over also into our commitment to verbal prayer. As Jews, we proclaim that we can find the divine presence in words, phrases, and sacred texts handed down to us by our ancestors. This is what it means to lay claim to a spiritual heritage that is conveyed to us mostly in language. We now take that same language and use it to give, rather than to receive.[52] Into it we place our own deepest feelings of love and awe, of affirmation and doubt, of joy and terror. These we offer, a gift wrapped in the garb of sacred speech, to the One in whose presence we stand always.

Sinai and Study

Faith in Sinai also commits us to a life of study. Judaism is a process of ongoing commentary. To be a Jew is to be a student. To be a self-affirming Jew is to love and study Torah. It is no small matter that the rabbis considered study equal in value to all the other mitzvot combined.[53] We are a people devoted to a text. *Yisra'el ve-oraita ḥad hu*; "Israel and Torah are one."[54] We can affirm this fully without denying the human origins of the Torah. We can celebrate it along with recognizing the fallibility of the text, along with agonizing over its moral imperfections, its ancient, rather than modern, sensibilities. A fallible text is one all the more in need

[52] See my introduction to *Your Word Is Fire: The Hasidic Masters on Contemplative Prayer*, as well as several of the Hasidic texts translated in that volume that speak of verbal prayer in Torah as a return of the divine gift of speech. See also the chapter on prayer in my book *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002).

[53] *Mishnah Pe'ah* 1:1. Quoted in the daily prayer book. See *Talmud Yerushalmi*, ad loc.

[54] On the history of this phrase (and its expansion: "God, Torah, and Israel are one") see again I. Tishby's remarks in *Kirjath Sefer* 50 (1973): 480ff.

of commentary, our way of bringing our past into the present before we hand it on to those who will create the future.

To be sure, the text has grown over the centuries. In the narrowest sense, our text is still the written Torah, those five books we read, study, and comment on in the synagogue each week. But that which was once commentary has now come to be included within our text: Talmud and Midrash, *aggadah* and *halakhah*, Kabbalah and Hasidic tales and teachings are, in the broader sense, a part of our text. Jewish poetry and music, the writings of philosophers and the creations of artisans, woven fabrics for Torah curtains and elaborate towers for *Havdalah* spice—all of these are parts of the text that we may choose to study. So too is the ongoing history of Israel; the lives led by Jewish men and women (the latter were largely excluded from the literary tradition until modern times) over the centuries are also a part of our text, that to which we offer commentary by our own words and our own lives.

It is, after all, that historical *contextuality*, that living "with the text" that places us within the chain of tradition, that makes our generation a contributor to the sum of what will be passed on to the future. We do this faithfully only as we submit ourselves to the role of student, *as we are willing to allow ourselves to be shaped by the text as we have received it and made it our own.* The unchanging text serves as the counterpoint to our constant evolution and development. Yes, Judaism *must* grow and change in every age. This is true of both *halakhah* and *aggadah*. They need to keep faith with the life experience of the Jewish people at each moment in their history. But Judaism also contains a clear fixed point. Each generation struggles with the text, the *same* text, transformed and brought to life by interpretation, but itself never changing. As we struggle to add to tradition, to reshape it for each new generation, the text is also given a chance at reshaping us, at making a real demand on the way we think and live. It is only insofar as we have been faithful students that we will be good teachers. Tradition is a precious and fragile commodity in our age. We bear it carefully, adding to it our own, to be sure, but not seeking entirely to bend it to our will, lest it break in our hands.

But our commitment to Torah study must be understood in a broader context as well. In a traditionally dualistic Western religious system, the need for Torah is quite apparent. The God who created humans in this world and has a specific will for human behavior would not be so cruel as to abandon us without giving us the Law. How could we *not* commit ourselves to eternal study of God's own word? But in the theology I outline here, why do we need Torah to know God or to live the good life? If God is manifest

in the world, study the world! If divinity is in all of being, study astronomy, botany, or zoology—but why Torah?

Let me add here that I fully agree that Judaism in the past has been both overly bookish and excessively narrow in focus. The turn away from nature as the great testimony to Y-H-W-H, which was still essential to our religious life in biblical times, toward a religion where God was known only through the world of books and commentaries, was a terrible narrowing of the Jewish soul. This is being rectified by the generations of Jews who have returned to the land in Erets Yisra'el, finding God in the rocks, soil, and historical remains of that beloved and pain-soaked land. We Diaspora Jews have been slower to learn this lesson, but that too has begun to change.

But God is manifest in the human mind and spirit *as well as* in birds, trees, and human love. God is there in the human longing to comprehend and unite with divinity. This stretching forth of mind and soul to that which is most deeply within us is an essential part of religion's value. The history of this seeking within the human race is a vital part of the story of Y-H-W-H. *Human faith itself is as much testimony to Y-H-W-H as are sunsets, seas, or mountains.* The history of the quest for God and for a God-inspired way of life among our people is a part of that story that we Jews alone can tell. We are obligated today, as always, to "tell it to our children." We are also obligated to preserve it as a part of the much-needed spiritual heritage of all humanity. To build a Judaism that will be of deep meaning to Jews in the future, we need to drink deeply of the teachings of the Jewish past. The religious value of Torah study is a seeking out of the ways in which the divine presence has been manifest in the Jewish people since the most ancient times. Its meaning changes, as it must, but it is still Torah.

Sinai and Community

Sinai was an experience of the entire people, a *communal* transformation, rather than that of an individual. When Israel arrived at the mountain, say the rabbis, they encamped there (the verb used is in the singular) "with a single heart";[55] only then were they ready to receive the word of God. Our religious language is that of community; it is *we* who stand before You, *we* who have sinned, and so forth. To live in faith with Sinai is to love and embrace the entire Jewish people. It is also to seek and build community, a grouping of like-thinking and like-living

55 *Mekhilta Yitro, Ba-hodesh* 1, p. 206; RaSHI to Exodus 19:2.

Jews whose collectivity will serve as a bridge between the individual and *klal Yisra'el*, the whole Jewish people.

We Jews who are still in the process of reclaiming our Judaism and returning to tradition in one way or another often think we do so as the result of our own individual odysseys, life experiences, and struggles that seem to us entirely private and idiosyncratic. But as we identify again with Judaism, we begin to find ourselves living richly in the context of the Jewish people, past, present, and future. Our role in linking the generations becomes a crucial part of our identity. We know too that *ahavat Yisra'el*, a love and compassionate caring for our fellow Jews, is a part of this heritage to which we return. There is no Judaism without Jews, and this is no mere tautology. Our religion is that of a people; there is no reclaiming the silent sounds or the holy moment of Sinai without reclaiming also as our own the *people* of Sinai, distanced as they may seem from the foot of that sacred mountain. Yes, the God we know is universal, and the divine image is there in every human. But there is also a strong place in our tradition to celebrate particularity, to stand close with those who share our history and, as we have been shown so strongly in our times, our *destiny*, as well as the special traditions we have inherited or chosen. This love extends to all Jews, including those with whom we have even the deepest theological or moral disagreements. It is as members of the same extended family that we love one another enough to argue, that we care enough to want to convince one another to mend our ways.

Somewhere in the course of living in community, we come to see that the journey is not an isolated one any more. As we build our own individual families and households in a communal context, or as we share in the broader "family" of community itself, we find that we have come *home* from the long wandering that so characterizes our contemporary society, home to our ancestors (whether biological or adopted), home to the Jewish people. Ultimately, we begin to see this process of odyssey and return as something more than individual, as belonging to the history of Jews in our day, so many of whom are seeking ways to reclaim our tradition. The decision to find our way as Jews, rather than to turn to the many other life paths that stretch before us in this age of choices, turns out to be our response to a Jewish voice that speaks from deep within us. Our homecoming is also a return to Sinai.

The Three Festivals: Sinai and the Sacred Cycle

As creation is celebrated by Shabbat, revelation is celebrated primarily by the cycle of the three annual festivals we call *shalosh regalim*, the three

ancient seasons of pilgrimage to Jerusalem. These three represent a cycle, the high point of which is Shavuot, the day that commemorates Sinai itself. The celebration of these festivals, and with them the rhythm of the sacred calendar as a whole, is our way of making the ancient tales of our ancestors' wanderings into vessels through which our own inner tales are told. In them, our own seeking and wandering find meaning.

The cycle begins with Pesach, the festival of liberation. We set out on our path and begin the journey with liberation from Egypt. The freedom we celebrate here is at once collective and individual, national and personal. The Egypt from which we are liberated is that of national oppression and loss of our distinctive Jewish identity.[56] It is also the Egypt of alienation from our root in Y-H-W-H and from the inability both to turn inward to know ourselves and to act to transform our lives. This Egypt is depicted in our sources both as *galut ha-da'at*, "the exile of the mind," and *galut ha-dibbur*, "the exile of language."[57] The Hebrew word for Egypt, *Mitsrayim*, is regularly described as derived from *metsar yam*, "the narrow straits of the sea."[58] On these festivals, in the Hallel, we thank the One to whom "I called from the narrow straits" and who "answered me in the breadth of *YaH*" (Psalm 118:5). Liberation is an opening up of the bonds, a refusal to be dominated any longer by the interests of our narrowest self. It is a seeing beyond ego and its constant demands, an opening to "the breadth of *YaH*," the broad vision of God throughout Creation.

Mind and word are both in bondage. The series of events that leads to Sinai begins in Egypt; the word cannot be spoken within us until the mind is freed from its own constrictions. But the link between Egypt and Sinai is crucial on other levels as well. Sinai is an act of covenant and commitment, the marriage of God and Israel. We are not able to make such a commitment until we are free, until we are whole enough to turn fully to the One. The fact that Sinai is preceded by liberation from Egypt forces us to recognize that, for others as well as ourselves, liberation takes precedence to commitment. The struggle to be free in all of its many forms (including freedom from religion itself when it becomes a source of bondage) is a sacred struggle. Our calendar connects these two events, the liberation

---

56 The rabbis say that Israel were redeemed from Egypt because they kept their distinctive Jewish names, maintained the Hebrew language, did not betray their secrets, etc. For the various versions of this list, see *Va-Yikra Rabbah* 32:5 and parallels.

57 These terms are commonly found in the literature of early Hasidism and are employed to spell out the Hasidic spiritual interpretation of the Exodus from Egypt. Mine is an updated version of that Hasidic reading.

58 R. Hayyim Vital, *Peri 'Ets Ḥayyim, ḥag ha-matsot*, "note." For some Hasidic examples, see R. Elimelech of Lezajsk, *No'am Elimelech*, ed. G. Nigal (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1978), p. 27, p. 160.

from bondage and the standing before Sinai, in a special way. Beginning with the day after the Exodus, we count fifty days, the period of the Omer, in anticipation of Shavuot, the anniversary of Sinai.

Revelation depends on freedom. The covenant of Sinai could be made only by a free people. True commitment to life in the presence of Y-H-W-H, for the individual as well, must begin with freedom. The miracle that sets the whole process of these great events in motion, according to one Hasidic view,[59] takes place neither on Pesach nor on Shavuot, but rather earlier, on the tenth of Nisan. That was the day on which the Israelites in Egypt set aside lambs for the offering in anticipation of the Exodus. On that day, they decided they could no longer live in slavery. They defied their Egyptian masters by preparing to celebrate their liberation, an act from which there was no turning back. This statement of defiance, the realization that there is no life without freedom, is the real miracle, to which all the "signs and wonders" of Egypt are secondary.

But liberation is not only a prelude to Sinai. We have had occasion earlier to mention that the rabbis described two moments as those when all Israel saw the divine Glory: at the splitting of the Sea and when standing before Mount Sinai. To describe the splitting of the Sea as a moment of revelation on its own is an important statement. It says that liberation *itself* is a form of revelation. One of the moments when the face of God is revealed to us is the moment when we set ourselves free. The "handmaiden at the Sea,"[60] who saw more than the greatest prophets, had her vision in the moment when she knew she was free. The sacred exhilaration of that moment should not be lost on us. It was human courage (Nachshon walking into the Sea) that brought forth the vision of God's presence. Sometimes we rush too quickly to link Pesach and Shavuot, as though to say that Pesach itself is incomplete, that it is a "mere" prelude to revelation. Here let it be said that we know of a revelation that happens in the moment when humans are liberated, as we know of one when they proclaim God's unity and declare themselves to be part of the great One. Each of these sacred moments, in order to be whole, needs completion by the other.

Pesach is celebrated by the great sacred meal, the seder, at which we tell again to a new generation with song, story, and feasting the tale of our liberation. Shavuot is celebrated by study, spending the whole night awake in

---

[59] This is the text from *Kedushat Levi*, by Levi Yizhak of Berdichev, which I translated for B.W. Holtz's *Back to the Sources* (New York: Summit, 1984), pp. 361ff.

[60] *Mekhilta Beshalah, Shirta* 3, p. 126.

enjoyment of Torah, anticipating the dawn, when the tale of Sinai is read once again.

The primary setting for celebration of Pesach is the family. Each household, the Torah tells us, took as much food from the sacrifice as its members needed to eat. In our day, where the community or *havurah* celebrates Pesach together, it is taking on the family role. But on Shavuot, the primary focus of celebration is that of community. The community of those who share Torah together teach and study through the night, making the text live again for one another. Here, the community embodies that community of old that stood as one before the mountain.

The cycle that begins with Pesach and reaches its height on Shavuot is drawn to conclusion on Sukkot, the third of the pilgrimage festivals. Sukkot may best be described as a celebration of living-in-the-world, a time when the lofty realities represented by the earlier festivals and by the just-passed season of *teshuvah*, or return and renewal, are brought into the ordinariness of daily life. To do this, we forsake the home in a way and thus transform it. We show that we build our lives, after all, in the frailest of dwellings. The *sukkah* is a place where the smallest of blessings is a great joy. Sukkot is the time when we take nothing more than fruit and branches to "rejoice before the Lord."

It is striking that the holiday cycle ends with Sukkot, which historically commemorates the wandering of Israel in the wilderness. There is no holiday to celebrate our arrival into the land, the conclusion of the journey. We begin by throwing off the oppressor's yoke, we count the days to the moment of covenant and commitment, then we set off on our wanderings, until we begin again with liberation. There seems to be a message built into this structure that points to a deeper meaning than that of the history of ancient Israel alone. The journey at which the symbols of the sacred year are pointed is an unending and cyclical one. Its fulfillment, as seen from the viewpoint of revelation, lies not in its conclusion (or in "arrival" at the final goal), but rather in its self-renewing power. While there are various messianic themes associated with Sukkot, its redemptive message lies mostly in the contentment of harvest and in our finding God within this world. Here, the tale with which we opened perhaps has to be modified: note that the wise man is still within the kingdom of lies when he comes before the king. Their encounter may be a simpler or more ordinary one than the one the tale describes. The portrait we draw may not be taken all at once, like the snapping of a camera shutter, but may be drawn line by line, day by day, as we wander through that kingdom.

The Word in Our Day

At Sinai, the voice of Moses came to bear the voice of God within it. We who believe that revelation is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process,[61] must, with fear and trembling, with deep humility and "holy audacity,"[62] allow our voices too to become bearers of that voice. The sound of Y-H-W-H is "a great voice that never ceased."[63] Today it needs us to be its trumpet.

Vav has drawn forth the point of the *yod*, bringing divinity from silence into speech. The many words may indeed be our own, but the single Word nevertheless lives within them. That same *vav*, we should remember, is also the particle of conjunction: it means "and." Through it, one is joined to the other, soul to Soul, word to Word. But the *vav* as that which joins one to the other is also that which acclaims Sinai as the moment of *yiḥud*, the union of bridegroom and bride. This mystical marriage between the primal pair, conceived alternatively as God and the Community of Israel, or blessed Holy One and *Shekhinah*, is also the union, according to the kabbalists, of *vav* and *heh*. Because *vav* means "and," it calls for union. As such, it too is incomplete in itself and seeks after its mate. So too does Judaism as revelation remain but "half a body." Those who are called to Sinai are sent forth from there to do the work of redemption. The gathering at the mountain is itself a form of *tsimtsum*, a concentration of energy that takes place only so that those who hear the Word may go forth to realize it in deed. *Vav* calls out for *heh*: revelation is the call that sets us on the path in search of a world redeemed.

[61] See Scholem's treatment of this theme in "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism," in his *The Messianic Idea, in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 282ff., and especially the kabbalistic sources quoted on pp. 298ff. In the past, recognition of the ongoing quality of revelation was largely, though not wholly, limited to the revelation of the divine will in the halakhic decision-making process. I would seek to conceive it in somewhat broader terms, embracing *aggadah* and religious creativity, as well.

[62] The phrase belongs to Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav. See *Likkutey MoHaRaN* 1:22:4, etc.

[63] Deuteronomy 5:19. This translation follows the rabbinic understanding as reflected in the Aramaic *Targumim.*

A NEO-HASIDIC LIFE: CREDO AND REFLECTIONS

Arthur Green

Personal Introduction

When I turned seventy years old earlier this year, I did not realize how fully the occasion would turn into a time of reflection. While I have every hope that my productive years are far from over, there is no question that reaching this big number tells one that the final phase of life has begun. There is no more saying "late middle age" or "sixty is the new forty." The Psalmist's words, however tempered by medical advances, still resound loudly in the ears of the septuagenarian. *Yemey shenoteno shiv'im shanah.* Anything more is surely *ḥesed ḥinam*, a pure divine gift.

Although my years have been marked by a number of shifts of direction in both my writing and my professional roles, in the perspective of hindsight I now realize they constitute a single project, one that has taken a number of forms but nevertheless bears a consistent message.

I was twenty years old, a senior in college, when I read Hillel Zeitlin's essay *Yesodot ha-Hasidut*, "The Fundaments of Hasidism."[1] I no longer remember whether it was Zalman Schachter or Alexander Altmann who put it in my hands, but they are the most likely candidates. To say that I fell in love is something of an understatement. I realized then and there that his words were giving expression to a deep truth that my heart already knew, and that this would be my religious language throughout my life. I promised myself (and Zeitlin) that I would translate this essay into English, a promise I fulfilled only half a century later.[2]

Although I did not yet have the term in my vocabulary, I have ever since then been a committed Neo-Hasidic Jew. Zeitlin joined with Buber, Heschel,

* This chapter was first published in "A Neo-Hasidic Life: Credo and Reflections" (pp. 65–87) from *Personal Theology*, edited by William Plevan (Academic Studies Press, 2013). Reprinted with permission.

[1] Originally published Warsaw, 1910, and included in the posthumous volume *Be-Fardes ha-Ḥasidut veha-Kabbalah* (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1960).

[2] It appears in my volume of Zeitlin's writings called *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era*, published by Paulist Press in the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series in 2012.