JUDAISM AS A PATH OF LOVE

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A rabbinic source dating from the early middle ages quotes the famous second-century sage Akiba as saying: “Had the Torah not been given, the world could have been conducted by the Song of Songs alone.”

Quite a world! Instead of the quaking, fiery mountain of Sinai, we would have only “Behold thou art beautiful, my love! My beloved has gone down into his garden, the bed of spices.” Instead of forty years in the wilderness, we would have only “Who is she who ascends from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved?” Instead of all the food and sexual taboos of Leviticus, only “Eat, O companions! Drink and become intoxicated, O lovers!” Quite a world.

Ordinarily we do not pay too much attention to attributions to famous sages appearing many centuries after their time. But this one is particularly fitting to much earlier sources on Akiba. It was he, after all, who got the Song of Songs included in the canon. The Christian scholars among you will recall that the Canticle is not quoted in the New Testament, because it was not yet canonized when the gospels were written. In the second century, the sanctity of three books was still being debated. When it came to the Song of Songs, Akiba declared: “There can never have been any doubt about this one. All of Scripture is holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies!”

Just what did he mean by that claim? Love is at the heart of the religious life. The Torah narrative is really all about the powerful love between God and His beloved, the Community of Israel, what Christians would come to call the ecclesia. The tales of the patriarchs, the Exodus, Sinai and the wilderness, the laws and statutes, were all a spelling out of that love. The Song of Songs was in fact first spoken at Sinai itself, the day of their mystical marriage. While the public voice of God may have been heard as declaring do’s and don’ts, at the very same moments He was whispering sweet nothings into His beloved’s ear. Those “nothings,” of course, come with a capital N. Our tradition understands holiness as a re-creation of that moment: standing with trembling awe as the mountain quakes, while at the same moment our heart is open and filled with love.

To stand in God’s presence is to live a life shaped by love. It requires an open heart, one that is able to receive the love of God that pours into us in each moment of our existence, and one that knows how to take in that blessing, that gift of love, and reshape it into a love for those

around us, both within the human community and extending to the full fellowship of God's creatures.

Lest you think me a theological naif or romantic, I need here to tell you about two characters who inhabit my mind and whose critical views I take quite seriously: Maimonides and my Grandma Green. Maimonides, the great 12th century Jewish philosopher, never speaks of God as loving humans. The claim that "God loves" was too anthropomorphic, or anthropopathic, for him. He speaks quite poetically about our love for God and admonishes us to cultivate it. But to say that God loves us was too much for the philosophical purist in him. As for Grandma Green, who became an atheist still back in Poland, when her Hasidic parents moved from their small town to the big city, she wrote me a letter when she heard that I was applying to rabbinical school. Composed in one-sentence night school English, it reads (yes, I still have it!): "dear Arthur I hear you still want to be a rabbi I would be prouder of you if you would be a teacher and teach people things that are true because if there was a God in the sky He would be shot down by Sputnik already." I try very hard not to believe in any sort of God that could be shot down by "Sputnik already."

What, then, do I mean when I speak of the love of God? I understand God as the underlying oneness of being, the one that already existed in the unspeakable moment before the big bang, the one that was present in every bit of rock and gas that was spewed forth by it, the one that existed in the burning crust of this planet as it sets a course of revolutions around its sun. This one exists within every life and non-living form that has evolved on our planet over these 13 or 18 billion years. It is Y-H-W-H, as the Hebrew name indicates, which simply means "Being," all of past, present and future existence artificially reified into a proper name that should really be rendered as 'Is-Was-Will Be" rather than "God." This force of existence that coalesced into the pond of chemicals that came to constitute life has then existed in every life-form that has come to be in our long, step-by-natural selection step, evolutionary journey. Because it has journeyed from the very simplest forms of life, one-celled creatures beneath the sea, to the great complexity of the still-mysterious human mind, we may say that it has an appreciation for complexity and diversity. Since it garbs itself in this coat of many forms and colors, I have every reason to assume that it delights in doing so. That delight, energizing the constant push forward in this endless process of self-manifestation, is rendered into our human emotional vocabulary as "love." Thus we say that the One loves each form that it inhabits for the split second in evolutionary time it dwells within it, even you and me. Or, to quote an earlier version of this story: "God saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good."

There is no task more urgent for all of our religious communities in the 21st century than that of revealing evolution for the sacred story that it is, helping humanity to transform its relationship with the natural world of which we are entirely a part. If we fail at this, God may indeed be left with nothing – this time with a small n. Let me translate this mythopoesis of evolution into the language of our liturgy, the spiritual setting within which much of my religious life takes place. Each morning and evening, our service opens with two blessings, recited in order. One is a blessing to God for the wonders of Creation: the great lights, the drama of day and night. Its central line is "God renews constantly, each day, the work of Creation." The second blessing is

that of love: “With great love have You loved us, the house of Israel, giving us Your teachings.” I do not believe that God does anything different between those two blessings. The trees in the forest stretch upward to receive sunlight, converting its rays into the chlorophyll they need to exist. The sun stands as a metaphor for the divine light, toward which all nature stretches. That is the first blessing. We too stretch forth to receive that same light. We convert it into our chlorophyll; we call it “love,” the stuff of life, that which allows to to be as fully human as the tree is fully tree. That is the second blessing.

Again, to be a religious person is to cultivate a heart open enough to receive that love and to reprocess it into love for those around us. To be a religious teacher, a *rebbe*, a guide, or a spiritual director, is to develop the mind, language, and listening heart to help others along the path to do so as well. That is the whole Torah, spoken while standing on one foot. The rest is commentary.

The Ba’al Shem Tov, the great 18th century master in whose name the Hasidic movement was created, taught that there exists only one single love in the world; that is the love of God for all His creatures. That love flows through all existence and penetrates every creature. It is the *hiyyut* or life-force within each of us. But it enters into the physical world in a fallen or broken state. We necessarily become alienated from our single Source in the course of our individuation, in our becoming ego-selves. The love that energizes us thus may come forth in broken, hidden, sometimes even painfully ambiguous ways. Many of us spend our lives in flight from God’s love, because we fear it will bring up too much pain. That love is also the source of desire, even lust, that which causes both animals and humans to mate and propagate their species. Even forbidden desires, he insisted, are part of that same stream of divine blessing. They are not to be acted upon, he taught (this was, after all, the 18th century!), but their energies should be recognized for what they are, transformed and turned back into an engine to charge our love of God.

The Ba’al Shem Tov had much in common with another great Jewish teacher, only a bit more than a century later, and in a place not far removed from his. I refer to Sigmund Freud, who also believed that all of eros is a single continuum, originating in libidinal energy and then shaped by the civilizing forces of repression and sublimation into love’s various expressions as we know them. The ultimate in sublimation, he would have said, might be the love of God, that love that seems most distant from its libidinal origins. Both Freud and the Ba’al Shem Tov, in other words, are looking at love as the same single spectrum; one is viewing it from below, the other from above.

In speaking of love’s various expressions, we should note that these too exist within the complex phenomenon we call religious love. The description of our relationship with God as a loving one first occurs in the final book of our Torah, called Deuteronomy in English, which is cast as a series of Moses’ parting admonitions to Israel before his death. There he speaks both of God’s love for His people and of our obligation to love God “with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might.” This love is mostly to be expressed in acts of loyalty, following His commandments and not rebelling, as did that generation of the wilderness. God emerges from

these passages as loving ruler and parent, whose protecting love and authority over us are one and the same, just as is ideally the case in either feudal fealty relationships (the knight defends his peasants; they reward him with the work of their hands) or in the more passionate but no less loyalty-demanding relationship of parent and young child. Follow the rules, act well, and you will be rewarded with a great and genuine outpouring of mama and papa's love. The Eden of childhood offers a sheltered existence so long as you obey the rules.

The relationship, we may say, is a mutually obligating one, but hardly a love between equals. "Our Father, our King" is the great refrain of liturgy we still intone in our holy season of repentance. That element has not disappeared from Judaism. Even when the prophets began to use the metaphor of spousal love, equal partnership was hardly what they had in mind. When Hosea hears God tell him to go marry a prostitute, in order to feel what God feels in his covenant with Israel, we are hardly in the realm of egalitarian marriage. Only when he tells us that God takes that wife back, having forgiven her sins, do we begin to feel that the Lord too has become vulnerable, that His love for us, despite all our feelings, touches something deep within His heart, making Him unable to let go of us, for all our faults. Allowing Himself to love us, as my teacher Heschel would have said it, means that God allows Himself to *need* us.

I mention this issue of equality in relationship here because in Judaism certain expressions of loving relationship are absent or rare when compared to the range found within Christianity. It is only rare Jewish sources that would describe God as "brother" or "friend" to humans. "You've got a friend in Jesus!" is not something easily translatable into the idiom of rabbinic discourse. Our God does not become mortal, undergoing with us the experience of facing death. Yes, God is close to us as we suffer. "I am with him is sorrow" is an expression of the Psalmist. But that means the protecting and compassionate love of one who looks down upon His suffering children, not one who knows the pain of death itself. For Judaism, the religion of a people, the greatest human suffering is that of exile, not that of individual death. The sages tell us that "everywhere Israel were exiled, the divine presence was exiled with them." God enters into exile with His beloved children. That is our equivalent, if you will, of Christ on the cross.

All this inequality is transcended, however, in the moment when Akiba proclaims the Song of Songs to be the Holy of Holies. Of course he means that the Canticle is to be seen as a love poem sung between God and Israel, with the angels standing as the chorus of "maidens of Jerusalem" in the background. But the Canticle, if you read it carefully, is all about seduction and pursuit. The two of them, shepherd and shepherdess or king and maiden, run through the gardens and across the hills, filled with longing for one another. It is a remarkably egalitarian tale of love, desire, and delight. The love is never consummated; certainly there is no sense of an impending marriage contract, where the husband will "acquire" a wife. Yes, she pines for him – "On my bed at night I seek the one my soul loves; I seek him but I find him not." But he too seeks her out and rejoices when he finds her – "I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride."

While this love affair was mostly depicted as a collective one, carried on between the blessed Holy One and the Community of Israel, occasionally a verse from this Scripture would be

applied to an individual moment or a single life. This was the case with Rabbi Akiba himself, subject of the best-known account of a mystical journey in the rabbinic tradition. "Four entered the orchard," we are told, Akiba and three of his friends. One died, one went mad, one became a heretic. Only Akiba, the text goes on to say, "entered in peace and came out in peace. Of him the Canticle says: 'Draw me after You; let us run. The King has brought me into His chambers."

Of course being brought into the king's chambers, in the original version of the Song of Songs, meant more than just contemplating divine beauty. It is the shepherdess speaking, and I leave it to your imagination to depict what went on when she entered those chambers. But here is the mystic, entering into a chamber of intimacy with a King who is no longer physical, to be sure, and not even quite completely male. By this I mean that the fiercely male deity of ancient Hebrew Scripture – "The Lord is a man of war," in the language of Exodus 15 – has been significantly softened, one might even say feminized, by the later rabbinic tradition. The same part of the liturgy that I mentioned earlier, the second blessing preceding the *shema'*, refers to God as "our compassionate Father, You who act with compassion, be compassionate toward us." That thrice-repeated verb, *ra<u>h</u>em*, is the word that in nominal form is *re<u>h</u>em,* womb. The tone here is very much that of father become mother; it is as though we are saying to God: "You who brought us forth into this world, treat us as Your own children."

Of course God created us, according to Scripture, not by birthing us, but by an act of speech. The prayer comes back to that, in a move deeply characteristic of Judaism's unique voice. We ask God, out of this compassion, to "place in our hearts the understanding to discern, to listen, to learn, and to teach, to actively fulfill the words of Your ongoing teachings in love." What God does with His compassion is offer us teachings, a Torah or instruction that is constantly being re-learned and taught. We ask in prayer for the mind and discipline to follow those teachings and to ourselves become teachers of them.

This is the quintessentially Jewish prayer: God as loving teacher, showing us that teaching is a chaste but passionate act of love! The eternal Word of God, there from the beginning, comes to be manifest in Torah, which means "teaching." To coin a phrase, we might say that "God so loved the world that He gave it His only begotten Torah." (Yes, we too have that problem with the "only begotten" claim.) We acknowledge that religious exclusivity has no place in our post-modern world. Gatherings such as this one are of course a testament to that.

I hope you masters of subtle religious discernment (a requirement of your calling, of course) understand the theological needle that I am trying to thread here. I mentioned that I have Maimonides as well as Grandma Green on my back. While the great philosopher could not make a claim that God loves, when he spoke of our love for God he turned directly to the Song of Songs for inspiration. He of course understood that such language works only when there is mutuality. We who open ourselves to it experience God's love in our daily lives, whether or not we have the theological language that permits us to say so. Religion, the real lived experience of life with God, precedes theology, not the other way around. But I have already said, in good

neo-Maimonidean fashion, that what we call "love" is the same stuff out of which the trees make chlorophyll, the radiant force of being.

That is who we are, little engines of humanization, humming away at the translation of *hiyyut*, the divine stream of energy or life-force, into our beloved and life-giving force of love. In gratitude for the gift of life, we give to the One that underlies all existence the only thing we really have to offer: the gift of our own humanity. We fashion God in our image, making the cosmic One into a "Thou," a loving partner. But we do this in response to a deep, innate sense of the mystery that dwells both within and around us. To say it in a way that is not entirely playful: We sense that God creates us in the divine image, and we are obliged to return the favor.

This blessing on love around which I have focused much of our discussion is placed in our liturgy immediately prior to the *shema*' the great proclamation of God's oneness that we call out twice each day, morning and evening. "Hear O Israel! Y-H-W-H our God, Y-H-W-H is one!." I do not translate Y-H-W-H as "the Lord," as is conventional, because that gives a totally false impression of what the divine name means. As I have said, Y-H-W-H is an impossible conflation of tenses in the verb "to be;" it should best be translated "Is-Was-Will Be," rather than "God" or "Lord." The proclamation as the mystics have understood it is that all being is one; there is nothing that exists outside the scope of divine oneness.

There is only one. That is the ultimate truth of all the mystics. But how do we mere mortals, living in a fragmented universe, in a life where we have struggled so hard to achieve and sustain our individual ego identities, ever hope to perceive that truth? If there is only one, are you and I as persons somehow less than real? Wouldn't such a claim threaten to drive us to madness, causing us to suffer the fate of one of Rabbi Akiba's companions? But here is why the *shema'* is preceded by this blessing on love. Love is the great gift given to us by our Creator (or by human nature, if you prefer) allowing us to reach beyond ourselves. Love allows us to feel a sense of oneness with the other, to go beyond our ego's limits, to stretch toward unity with another, hence potentially with all others, and with the great "Other." Through the mirror of love we are given a glimpse into the oneness of being, should we choose to open our eyes to it. It is through the pathways of "Great Love" and "Love Eternal," in the language of our daily prayerbook, that we come to open our hearts to the oneness of Being.

Immediately following the cry of "Hear O Israel!" we proceed with the next line in the Biblical text: "You shall love Y-H-W-H your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might." Just as love has led us to the possibility of seeing and calling out God's oneness, so does that moment of being in the one call forth a response within us. We return from oneness with a commandment to respond in love, to turn the mystical insight back into the commodity of loving the other. Our love of God is to be demonstrated by the love we share for His creatures, both within and beyond the human sphere. The great proclamation of God's oneness, the line for which martyrs ever since Akiba himself gave their lives, is thus sandwiched between two declarations of love. It is our realization of God's love that allows us to reach that moment, and it is with our love for God and for God's creatures that we are to come forth from it.

Once again, that is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary.

It may have occurred to you by now that the Judaism I describe here has rather little to do with what most contemporary American Jews think their religion to be. Jews, as is well known, are among the most secularized sectors of the American population. But even among the more traditional, most identify Judaism more with observance, with loyalty to the forms of piety, than with its devotional content. This has a long history, part of it reaching back to earliest times, when the emerging rabbinic community, in contrast to the earliest Christian church, defined membership around observance of the Torah's law rather than around declarations of faith. Our Israel was a community that lived a certain way, allowing for some range of variety in exactly how faith was to be formulated. Certainly not all pious Jews would agree with what I have said here, for example. But we all live with the same forms of religious life.

In modern times, as Jews racing forth out of the ghetto found that secular education was their best ticket into equality and integration, observance was watered down into folkway, leaving little left of the spiritual content toward which it had pointed. But we must also not minimalize the tremendous effect of the Holocaust on the Jewish soul. Still within living memory, a third of us were slaughtered and the rest of us became survivors. Try to bring up any conversation about love of God with most Jews of my generation or that of my parents, now mostly gone, and you would immediately get Auschwitz thrown in your face. "So where was God in 1944?" became the dominant and unanswerable religious question for most Jews for more than half a century. The willingness to re-engage with spirituality, the rediscovery of once-neglected mystical traditions, and even the emergence of this old/new creature called a Jewish spiritual director are all signs of the painstaking recovery of the Jewish body politic from that trauma, a recovery still in its early stages. That struggle for recovery is a burden still borne by every Jew who seeks out a spiritual life. It is one reason why many flee from Judaism in the course of doing so.

This recovery meets a Jewry deeply weakened by the assimilatory pressures of life in the contemporary Western world. Most American Jews suffer from a shallow knowledge of their own traditions, inadequate to match the depth of seeking that many of them bring to bear. Israelis, battered by an ongoing struggle with a militant and often backward religious establishment, take on a secularism of an even more militant cast. How do we teach them a Judaism that is a religious path of openheartedness and compassion, one that combines the worldly concerns of Israel's prophets with the deep spirituality of the Hasidic masters?

This is the work to which I have tried to devote most of my life. I ask for your prayers and support for all those of us who are climbing up this rather steep mountain. Fortunately, we have the example of Moses himself, our first and greatest teacher, who already made such a trek. His results were pretty good.