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CONFERENCE TOPIC: “DO RELIGIOUS NATURALISTS BELIEVE IN GOD?”

(UNPUBLISHED)

Because I do theology in a highly personal way – something I affirmed early, in choosing Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, rather than the Tanya, as my Hasidic mentor, I open by quoting several documents from my past.

The first is a letter by my Grandma Green, my father’s immigrant atheist mother, dated March 1, 1961, preserved in her original night-school English:

I see in your letter that you are planning to become a Rabbi well good luck to you. But I would be more proud of you if you would be a good teacher and teach people to be smart and beleave in things that are real rather than teach them thinks that are unbeleavable if there would be a god in heaven he would be shot down by all the missles and sputniks...”

I have always felt that I owed it to her not to believe in a God that could be, quite literally, shot out of the sky.

Next comes a query by *Commentary Magazine*, in a survey conducted in 1996, titled “What Do American Jews Believe?” This of course was the neo-conservative *Commentary* redux’s meme of the famous *Commentary* Symposium of 1966, “The Condition of Jewish Belief.”

I was invited to participate. The opening question was “Do you believe in God?” My answer began with the word “Pfui!” followed with “That is the wrong question.” How about “Do you use the word “God” in your vocabulary, and what do you mean by it?” (I suspected their next question was going to be: “Are you or have you ever been a member of...”)

Somewhat more gently, I today want to repeat my objection to that formulation.

My final dip into past documents is from an essay “How I Pray,” originally written as a supplement to the Hebrew edition of my *Radical Judaism* (2017), but now appearing in English in my just published collection of essays *JUDAISM FOR THE WORLD*.¹ But here we are very much in the world of where I hang my hat today:

¹ New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. The essays in this volume update my thinking since *Radical Judaism*, which appeared in 2010.

Ribbono shel 'Olam! Lord of the Universe! I do not believe in You! You our all-good Maker and Master, You who watch and listen (Do you taste, sniff, and touch us as well?), know everything and act for goodness always, You who “support the fallen, heal the sick, release the bound, and keep faith with those who lie in the dust.” I do not believe in You. I have seen and tasted too much dust. I read the daily headlines: war, destruction, typhoon, tsunami, earthquake. I have dared to love and watched my loved ones die. Those fool enough to love me will soon watch me die as well. Why? What should I believe? Koheleth said it all. In a world filled with both human evil and nature’s indifference to us, how am I supposed to believe in You?

But to whom can I bring the pain of my disbelief if not to You? To whom can I cry out if not to You, the All, Foundation on whom my house is built, Rock upon whom I stand, Sea into whose oblivion I will fall when oblivion becomes my fate? Am I too weak to live without You, without a Someone into whose ear to scream, so that I have to invent You, O terrible plaything of my imagination? There are days when it feels like that. Or am I indeed, as I think on better days, wise enough to have seen beyond the horizons of my daily mind, deep enough to see the Truth of truths, the far shores of the chasm of great emptiness so well described by Rabbi Nahman, to recover a truth beyond reality, beyond words. That truth knows of something I can barely address as “You,” but surely cannot call an “It.” Then I dare to open myself and turn to You, the hope and dream of that place, across the chasm that is none other than the hole in my broken heart, that gives me life, that allows me to go forward, day after day.

I do not believe in You. But my life is saved, because I do not believe in “believing” either. “Believing” has about it the air of intellectual proposition, a claim that cannot be proven and is therefore a matter of *mere* belief. But You are on the other end of that spectrum of doubt, belief, and certainty. You are “above the line” rather than “below,” or vice versa. I do not believe in You; I *know* you, a knowing that always bears within it that first occasion of the Biblical word for knowing: “Adam *knew* his wife Eve.” I know You with an intimacy even beyond that sexual knowing. I know you as I know myself, since this little individual human self is so very obviously a part and a reflection of Universal Self, of the One that underlies and overlays and precedes and follows and surrounds and fills and laughs and cries within all that is/was/will be. That is more than a belief; it is a **knowing**, a message from the root of my contemplative soul, one that I have sought long and hard to escape so many times, but to which I always return.

Being a senior figure among Jewish seekers these days, I attract contact from all sorts of younger folks, including readers of mine (I am especially delighted at my many readers in Israel, in Hebrew translation), but also people who have just heard my name and think I represent something different. One of the most interesting such occasions to me recently was a young man who is an undergraduate at Yeshiva University. He mentioned me to one of his teachers there, asking whether he should read me, and was told: “Green is nothing but Kaplan with a Shtreimel.” I rather enjoyed that, as I think some of you will as well. Just the thought of it... I imagine that characterization goes back to Rabbi Daniel Landes’ somewhat vicious review of my *Radical Judaism*, and our correspondence about that, which can be found on Jewschool.com. There Landes said that “Green’s God is not the God of Israel and his Torah is not the Torah of

Israel,” and proclaimed Mordecai Kaplan to be my “hidden master,” a big surprise to many old-time Reconstructionists, to be sure. My guess is that it is more likely his teacher read Landes than Green.

But I want to say that, humor set aside, it is not a true or an accurate characterization. For those who don't know, I was a student of Abraham Joshua Heschel, not Mordecai Kaplan. Despite the significant degree to which I move beyond Heschel, that very much remains the case. For Kaplan, as I understand him, religion is at its core a social phenomenon, a society's way of articulating and keeping faith with its highest values. Despite our friend Mel Scult's efforts to present the seeker and poet in Kaplan, I think this socio-civilizational approach, with Jewish peoplehood at the center of the circle, is bedrock Kaplan. Bedrock Heschel, for me, are the first hundred pages of *God in Search of Man*, describing religion as being about the inner life, “depth theology,” as he calls it. Religion, in this case Judaism, exists in order to offer a set of tools for the cultivation of that inwardness, rather than serving primarily as a social phenomenon or a projection of communal values. The essential way-stations in Heschel's inward journey, and mine, are wonder and mystery, awe and love. The Jewish people is an entity that shares this ancient legacy of spiritual language, one that both Hasidism, Heschel's entry-place to Judaism, and mine, neo-Hasidism, seek to revive. I share with Heschel a concern about the secularization of consciousness in our modern and post-modern world, a loss of the sense of mysterious profundity of life, the loss of values like reverence and humility that are inspired by an openness to that profundity. I rejoice in the fact that the questions Heschel raises there are universal, reaching far beyond Judaism into an examination of what it means to be a religious human being, in the broadest sense. I also share his assertion that our response to the perception of divine presence in the world has to an activist one, working to create a human society in which the divine image is respected in every human being, and where *malkhut Shaddai* will be realized in a way that means *she-dai le-khol beriotav*, the more equal sharing of wealth and resources among the needy. Seeing inwardness and the individual's quest as the core of religion does not lean toward a turning aside from social responsibility and religion's great power to transform the world for good. Toward this goal, alliance with other such progressive religious forces in the world is a necessity, and Heschel took a lead in that as well.

Although I, like Heschel, ground my theology in the testimony of inner experience, I diverge from him precisely on our question for today, reformulated as “What do you mean when you say Y-H-W-H?” I turn to the Hebrew rather than the English term because I have no particular investment in defending use of the word “G-O-D,” deriving as it does from the Anglo-Saxon version of ancient Germanic tongues, stemming from the language of European paganism. But the *shem havayah* does have ultimate meaning for me.

My theology (and from here I am drawing freely both from my newest book and from my student Ariel Mayse's excellent characterization in his *Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers* essay) may rightly be described as a mystical and monistic panentheism. While committed to many elements of traditional religious language, I am ultimately a monist; I seek to understand the Jewish faith in one God as pointing beyond itself toward the ultimate oneness of all being.

I believe that there is only One. Better said: I have glimpses of an inner experience that tells me that there is only One. That One embraces, surrounds, and fills all the infinitely varied forms that existence has taken and ever will take. We Jews call out that truth twice daily in reciting *Shema' Yisra'el*, "Hear, O Israel." "Y-H-W-H is One" means that there is none other. Our daily experience of variety, separate identity, and alienation of self from other renders an incomplete and ultimately misleading picture of reality. "You were One before the world was created; You are One since the world was created." Unchanged, eternal; worldly existence covers over the reality of that deeper truth, but human consciousness is so constructed as to permit glimpses of it to shine through.

I do not claim any uniqueness or special status in having perceived moments of that reality. I believe that many people have such insights. Most, including me at many times, work hard to flee or deny them. The one Being is clothed within each being. For reasons we do not begin to understand, that One dressed itself in this "coat of many colors" called the universe, and on this planet entered into the endless dance of variety and multiplicity that we call evolution. It did so, and continues to do so, not with any sense of intentionality that we can understand from human will or intellect. Yet it does seem to move, albeit unsteadily, over the eons, toward both complexity and diversity in the forms through which it is manifest. It is present within each unique form of existence that has come to be in the universe, and yet remains One, in and through them all. The Zohar refers to this as *yihuda 'ila'ah*, the "upper unity," meaning that there is only the one, and *yihuda tata'ah*, the "lower unity," meaning the perseverance of that unity even amid the endless diversity of existence.

This glimpse of a monist or panentheist worldview, one that sees God in all, the One manifest in each of the many, but the mystery ever beyond our grasp, lies deeply veiled within Judaism – and so too in Christianity and Islam – behind the mask of religious personalism, faith in a personified deity who created this world as a human-like act of will, rules over history, guides each person's fate, and promises redemption. But awareness of this all-pervasive spiritual presence that fills the world is never completely absent from these western faith traditions, partly due to their shared neo-Platonic legacy. "Behold, He stands behind our wall, peering through the windows, gazing through the cracks (Cant. 2:9)." The One is ever "peering through" the masks of personalism and multiplicity behind which it is hidden, an invitation for us to peer behind those masks as well. The ancient rabbis referred to God as "the place of the world," meaning that there is no place devoid of God's presence, that the world exists *within* the One. Y-H-W-H came to refer to an abstract and elusive entity that preceded and underlay all existence.

This is not to admit, as Kaplan would have had it, that mystics are "fuzzy thinkers," but rather that there is an essential "fuzz" that reaches beyond our ability to think. That fuzz is referred to in the biblical narrative, as read through the Hasidic lens, as *'av he-'anan*, "the thick cloud," that which Moses (the seeker) has to enter, because *sham ha-elohim*, "that is where God is." "Transcendence" in the context of such a faith does not refer to a God "out there" or "over there" somewhere beyond the universe, since I do not know the existence of such a "there." Transcendence means rather that Y-H-W-H—or Being—is so fully present in the here and now of each moment that we could not possibly grasp the profundity of that presence. Transcendence thus dwells *within* immanence. Transcendence is first and foremost an epistemological truth, as it mostly is for

Maimonides. I make no ontological claim for it. There is no ultimate duality here, no “God and world,” no “God, world, and self,” but only one Being and its many faces – including our own.

The quest to know that One lies at the heart of my philosophical and spiritual path. I was attracted to such a reading of Judaism primarily through the writings of two great Jewish thinkers, one Hasidic and one neo-Hasidic. When I was twenty years old, I read an essay by Hillel Zeitlin (1871-1942), who was essentially channeling the theology of Dov Baer of Mezritch (1704-1772). Zeitlin’s opening chapters of “The Fundamentals of Hasidism,” those on “Being and Nothingness,” “*Zimzum*,” and “The Power of the Maker within the Made,” are summarized in what I have said above.² Interestingly, Dov Baer took his highly abstract theology and, in an attempt to make it accessible, described it in folksy parables, mostly about fathers and sons. To oversimplify somewhat, I might say that Heschel (a direct descendant of the Maggid) was more attracted by the *mashal*, the warm, human language of the parable, and I more by the abstract *nimshal*. Heschel needs there to be a divine voice that comes from *beyond* the mystery, a transcendent declaration of love and call to action. For him, the ultimate needs to be personal, and vice versa. For me, it is from *within* the ‘*av he-‘anan*, rather than beyond it, that I feel myself called. To say it differently, I believe that there is a deep monistic stream within Jewish mystical thought, one that lies hidden behind the face of the religious personalism that had been inherited from earlier eras. Ours is an age, I believe, when that understanding of Judaism needs to be taken “out of the closet.”

I should also say here that my approach differs from Heschel in that I make no claim to speak for anyone but myself. Heschel, especially in facing the loss of the *sho’ah*, felt a great need to stand as a representative voice of the entire tradition, often speaking in the language of biblical imperatives. “This is what Judaism teaches” was the platform on which he stood. That is why he refused to be labelled as “mystic” or “*hasid*,” he wanted to claim the whole tradition as his own. I offer only my own reading of the Jewish sources, especially the mystical/hasidic teachings, in which I have been steeped for so many years, in the hope that others, too, might find my insights useful.

The cover of my *Radical Judaism* defines me as “neither theist nor atheist,” but something else. I do not believe in A Supreme Being; I believe that Being is supreme. I like to think of myself as belonging to the community of *dorshey yihudekha*, “those who seek out Your unity,” as 16th century Eleazar Azikri described the Jews. Divine unity means the affirmation that all existence is One. All apparently multifarious reality is a *levush* (“garment”), a term I use (as do the mystical sources) with great frequency. Y-H-W-H dwells within the human heart and within all existence as well. Every extant form is one of the infinite expressions of Y-H-W-H, one of the endless “faces” of Being, of the divine One. Here we must distinguish my theology of pantheism from pantheism, or the belief that God is the sum of all reality; divinity and the world, universe, or cosmos, are identical. For the pantheist, or at least this one, seeing all beings through the lens of oneness is transformative, opening a gateway to infinity. Y-H-W-H embraces the totality of being, and yet is infinitely more as well. The Divine infuses the world

² Now available in my translation in *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012). Also included in *A New Hasidism: Roots* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2018).

and is expressed through the cosmos, but nothing—not even the name Y-H-W-H—can adequately convey the infinity of the One. Reality as we encounter it is the self-expression of a singular force, one that has always been present within the universe and, in a way almost entirely opaque to our perception, beyond our ken of it as well.

This infinity is not comprehensible or even credible to the rational human mind that thinks in terms marked by measure, definition, and limit. It is, however, perceptible to a different level of human consciousness, one that dwells deep below our ordinary consciousness and lives in subtle contact with it. It is to this level of the human mind – you may call it “the mythic imagination” - that religious language, including both verbal speech and that residing in symbolic gesture, is meant to appeal. Religious teaching (translating *torah*) points us toward that level of discourse and opens us to it. Here I would say that my thinking is best understood as a Jewish parallel to the approaches to religion and mythology of a Wilfred Cantwell Smith or a Joseph Campbell. I understand religious myth as a universal human phenomenon, and one that speaks a deeper truth than can be spoken in discursive prose. I am not quite a Perennialist in my understanding of the phenomenon of religion, but I am influenced by their thinking, as well as by the allied teachings of Jungian psychology.

Hillel Zeitlin once argued that Spinoza saw the world as a machine immutably governed by the laws of nature, but the Ba'al Shem Tov saw this same world as an ongoing work of art, with God as the Artist/Creator ever fashioning it anew. I stand within this tradition of my Hasidic and neo-Hasidic forebears, but I live in the 21st century, meaning that I see that constant re-creation as taking place within an evolutionary context. The task of theology is one of *reframing* the accepted accounts of origins and natural history offered by the scientific consensus, helping us to view them in a different way, one that may guide us toward a more profound appreciation of that same reality, and indeed inspire us to help to preserve it. The tale of life's origins and development, including its essential building block of natural selection, is well known to us as moderns. But what would it mean to recount that tale with our eyes truly open, and what will that attempt reveal of what we might mean by Y-H-W-H?

We would come to see the entire course of evolution, from the simplest life forms millions of years ago, to the great complexity of the human brain (still now only barely understood), and proceeding onward into the unknown future, as a *meaningful* process. That is how I reinterpret the Torah's “God said...and there was” or the rabbis’ “God looked into Torah and created the world.” “Torah” means “language,” and language makes for the possibility of meaning. The process by which the world came to be is ultimately a *decipherable* and *meaningful* one. This is the poesis that underlies science. It can be translated from the realm of transcendent mystery into the linguistic symbols we need in order to wrap our minds around it. That translation is as close as we can come to “divine speech.” Moses (Shall we think of him as embodying the human quest for wisdom?) at Sinai serves as the *meturgeman*, the translator, for Y-H-W-H, the One who dwells in a realm beyond language, who speaks only through thunderclaps, and perhaps all the other sounds of nature as well. The Torah of Moses is our guide in making meaning out of that cacophony. Kabbalists and scientists might agree that there will always be a part of it that eludes us. Remember that the Kabbalists taught that there were lights behind the letters. Those “lights” were a way of referring to a greater abstraction, leading toward something still more elusive. Here the neo-Platonic vision of spiritual “enlightenment” peers through the personalist mask.

But there are not only lights; there are also sounds behind the letters in our Torah scroll. Since we are having this conversation in the days leading up to Rosh Hashanah, I want to say a word about the *shofar*. Amid those thunderclaps at Sinai, there was “the sound of a *shofar*, growing louder and louder.” Was there someone blowing a *shofar* there? We are not told that. Or was it the thunderbolts themselves that were, as we might say, “trumpeting away,” louder and louder? In any case, what Moses translated came from beyond anything we might call speech. When we blow the *shofar*, we seek to hint back toward that reality. From our end of that dialogue with the One of inner silence, we too need to go beyond words.

Translation: There is a One that is ever revealing itself to us within and behind the great diversity of life. That One is Being itself, the constant in the endlessly changing evolutionary parade. Viewed from our end of the process, the search that leads to discovery of that One is our human quest for knowledge and meaning, embracing both scientific advance and religious interpretation. But turned around, seen from the perspective of the constantly evolving life energy itself, evolution can be seen as an ongoing process of revelation or self-manifestation. *We discover; it reveals. It reveals; we discover.* As the human mind advances (from our point of view), understanding more of the structure, process, and history of the ever-evolving One, we are being *given* (from its point of view) ever-greater insight into who we are, how we got here, and where we are going.

But here is where it gets tricky. “We are being given” is a claim of revelation. The oneness of being, not a fellow in the sky with some sort of human will, nevertheless reveals itself to us. It speaks to us, not in human words, but in the language of instinct. Just as every tree in the forest is “commanded” by an inner voice that says: “Grow those roots! Reach toward water!” and “Stretch higher and get some of that sunlight!” and every animal knows the inner voice that says: “Eat! Thrive! Mate and reproduce before you die!” – so does the human, because of the development of our brains, have an inner voice that asks “What are you doing here? Why have you come to be?” - or, in the imperative, “Figure it out!”

Va-yomer Y-H-W-H el ha-Adam: Ayekah? “God said to the human: “Where are you?” That single word, *ayekah*, is all I need of revelation. The rest is commentary. In it, I hear the One cry out: “Make meaning! Know Me! Be aware! Remember!” *Act and live* as one who is aware of the oneness of all being! It is all there in that divine charge or challenge. The *ayekah*, turned around, may also be read as another single word: *anokhi*, “I am.” All that needs to be said is there in the pre-verbal *anokhi*, the “I am” of Sinai, maybe even in its silent *alef*.

The deep truth of oneness is easily forgotten as we go about the business of this-worldly living. We have to surround ourselves with a series of reminders: on our foreheads and our doorposts, on our calendars and in our daily lives. *The OneGod* calls upon us to create religions, even to create projected deities made in our image. **We create gods because we intuit Y-H-W-H.** We do so in response to our instinctive understanding, to hearing that inner voice. These days especially, as our world is so threatened, I tend to hear it in more plaintive tones, a plea rather than a booming command. Figure it out, O humans, before it is too late.

Can what you have just heard be termed “religious naturalism?” I have usually eschewed that term, mostly because it seems to be posed in opposition to something else called “religious

supernaturalism.” I reject the distinction. I give credence to no supernatural event that is not fully natural. I also know of no natural event that cannot be seen as supernatural, if the inner eye is open. It’s all a matter of perspective.

Can one live with this non-dualistic, monistic consciousness at all times? Like the Hasidic masters I read, I understand that these moments are impossible to maintain, that this type of awareness, seeing the supernatural within the sunrise or the blade of grass, is fleeting and subtle. Indeed, there is something quite frightening about this unitive vision, for it threatens to totally overwhelm our sense of individuated self. We exist as a part of it, and yet we protect ourselves from becoming totally overcome by that type of expansive consciousness. Inability to control it would be considered psychosis. *Veha-hiyyut ratso va-shov* is the way this is described in the Hasidic sources; “the life-energy,” really referring to our ability to remain conscious of it, “ebbs and flows.” However, when those self-protective mechanisms that defend us from it are given too much freedom, they become *kelipot*, “shells” that keep out the flow of divine light. We are present to cosmic oneness in sacred moments, either ritually determined or personal, in the context of human relationships, particularly, for me, in moments of shared silence. This very non-constancy of divine awareness is also what allows for freedom of choice and hence sacred deed, for the majority of our lives, including our religious lives, takes place in the state of *katnut ha-moḥin* or “diminished” consciousness.

One final, but crucial, step. The fact that the oneness of being entered into this infinitesimal form that I call myself, and has chosen to linger here for these nearly eighty years, is not my doing; I did nothing to earn or deserve it. It was the entirely natural result of the act of love between my father and mother. But I also see it as yet another miraculously supernatural incarnation of the endless One. Consciousness, even the ability to contemplate the entire process of existence, as we are doing here, entered into that fertilized *ovum*. I am grateful for it; I need someone to whom to express that gratitude. That is how I understand *mizmor le-todah* in one of my favorite psalms: “A hymn *to* gratitude.” I am grateful for this sense of gratitude, the beginning point of the religious mind. It forces me to sufficiently personify the One so that I have someone to whom to say “Thank You.”

Let me say this in another way. Because my existence is an unearned gift, I consider it an act of *hesed*, that which Christians call “grace.” The existence of all creatures, that which allows them to be, is seen by the mystic mind as the flow of *shefa*’, divine bounty, or of *hiyyut*, the force of life, ever streaming from the One into each of the many. As divine radiance, taking the form of sunlight, flows into trees, they use it to make chlorophyll, their stuff of life. As that same radiance flows into us, we turn it into love, our stuff of life. The grateful religious mind experiences our existence as a *matnat hesed*, a gift of unbounded love. We feel called upon, as receivers of love, to love in return. We express that love in the way we relate to all other beings, loving them *kamokha*, “as yourself,” as part of that same single One. But religion also provides us the forms by which to stimulate and express that love for the One as a whole, *ahavat ha-shem*. When I recite each morning the blessing (in the positive) *she-’asani yisra’el*, I feel grateful to be heir to the great treasury of those forms called Judaism.

This leads to what is most important to me: the possibility of a devotional life. That is what it is all about for us *ḥasidim* and neo-*ḥasidim*, for us Heschelians and neo-Heschelians.

Yiddishkeyt iz a derekh in avoide, as I heard Zalman Schachter say it to me so many years ago. “Judaism is a way of service” or “a path of devotion.” To say that back in biblical language: “You shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.” I stand in the awesome presence of the Cosmic One and say to it: “I am here to serve.” I even feel *called upon* by the Cosmic One to serve in awe and in love. That’s the payoff of my religious life. Explaining what I mean by it, as I have done here and elsewhere, is important. But that act of explanation, called theology, is a secondary act. It pales beside the moment of devotional response, of *‘avodat ha-shem* itself, which transcends all such explanations.