

Restoring the Aleph

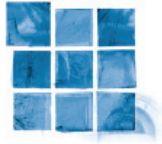
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*Judaism
For The
Contemporary
Seeker*

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לעשות
A Time to
Act
Council
for
Initiatives
in Jewish
Education

CJIE ESSAY SERIES

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Created in 1990 by the Commission on Jewish Education in North America, CIJE is an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to the revitalization of Jewish education. CIJE's mission, in its projects and research, is to be a catalyst for systemic educational reform by working in partnership with Jewish communities and organizations to build the profession of Jewish education and mobilize community support for Jewish education.

The Zohar, the greatest work of Jewish mysticism, is deeply concerned with the nature of exile and the exilic situation in which God, the cosmos, and the Jew all find themselves. In one of his more profound comments on this situation,¹ the thirteenth-century author suggests² that the divine name that accompanied Israel into exile was itself a broken one. The Zohar knew and accepted the ancient tradition that “wherever Israel is exiled, the divine Presence is exiled with them.”

The name that accompanied them was אהיה, EHYEH, God’s “I am” or “shall be.” The name, however, was broken: The aleph of EHYEH remained above in the heavens, while the three letter HYH joined themselves to Israel. But in this configuration of the verb “to be,” the aleph is the indicator of the future tense. Its departure means that Israel in exile loses hope, becoming detached from a sense of its own future. All that remains is HYH, that which “was,” the memory of past glory, past intimacy with the Holy One, the cosmic Aleph. Exile becomes truly serious when it causes us to lose hope.

Why should we feel hopeless as we think about the future of Jewish life in the new millennium before us? We have come through this most unspeakably complicated century of Jewish history a strong, proud, and free people. For the first time in nearly two thousand years, we can say that Jews are no longer oppressed by any regime for the crime of being Jewish. Popular antisemitism still exists, but not on a scale to constitute a significant threat. Israel is living through an era of prosperity and is looking forward to a time of real peace, even as terrible costs in human life are being paid along

1. Zohar Hadash 38a.

2. Based on the text of Ezek. 1:3.

the way. Jews in North America have achieved levels of material success and acceptance by the established powers of this society that go beyond the immigrant generation's wildest dreams. Even the final taboo against mingling with Jews, that of accepting them into the family circle, is breaking down. Surveys show that few Christian families, especially those of older American Protestant stock, object any longer to their children marrying Jews.

Ah, but there's the rub. Intermarriage, it turns out, was not quite what we had in mind. We sought full acceptance in America: That meant elite schools, executive positions in old companies, moving into the "right" suburbs, even joining the country club. But somehow we naively thought it would stop there. Jewish boys would take Jewish girls to the country club dance, or at least would come home to marry Jewish women after a few "flings" on the other side. Now we discover that there are no "sides" any more. Young Jews growing up in this country after 1970 are almost fully integrated into American white upper-and middle-class society, which, with but rare exceptions, embraces them with open arms.

For the vast majority of American Jews under forty, this is the fourth generation since immigration. These are Jewish kids, or half- or quarter-Jewish kids, whose grandparents were born mostly in urban East Coast American cities. Few of them live in those cities any more, and a great many are scattered to other parts of the continent altogether. To these Jews the "old country" is Brooklyn, Philadelphia, or Baltimore. Their grandparents' tales of child are as likely to be about baseball games as they are about pickles or herring from the barrel. Jewish knowledge is rare in that second generation; most were too busy Americanizing to care much about the bits of Jewish lore or practice their parents had dragged with them from across the sea. The fourth generation has no direct tie to the world of East European Jewish life and its spiritual and cultural riches. All that belongs to history. The natural ties to Yiddishkeit, including the rhythms of the Jewish year, the inflections of Jewish speech, even the humor, which

we Jews over fifty (including the important group of children of Holocaust survivors, whose memories are still more vivid) remember so well, are no longer a part of this younger generation's psyche.

From the twenties through the sixties, Jews were among the great proponents of melting-pot ideology. Here we were, part of a new nation being forged in America. Forget the old hatreds and divisions of Europe! Those were code words for us; we hoped they would mean "Leave antisemitism behind."

"Who wants to visit Europe? And immigrant uncle of mine used to proclaim, as the first relatives ventured forth as tourists in the 1950s. "We ran away from there!"

Here we would help to create something better, fairer, less hateful, more humane. Ethnic divisions would recede with the passage of time. Even racial divisions, we thought somewhat naively, would eventually fall away like to many relics of backwoods prejudice.

In the late 1960s the pendulum began to swing the other way. Ethnicity was rediscovered by America, thanks significantly to the "black is beautiful!" Cry that came forth from African-Americans toward the end of the Civil Rights generation. Distinctiveness and pride in origins took the place of full integration as the final goal. Latinos were just beginning to become articulate as a minority, and they too, clearly wanted to hold on to some of their old ways, including language. But if black and Latino were beautiful, so were Italian, Polish, Armenian, and all the rest, including Jewish. For us, this era in American cultural history coincided with the shock-therapy in Jewish awareness offered by the Six-Day War, leading to a major renewal of Jewish life over the course of the succeeding two decades.

This renewal was heralded by the growth of the Jewish counterculture, best known through the Havurah movement and the *Jewish Catalogues*. But it includes such mainstream phenomena

as the growth of day school education; the development of Jewish Studies programs in colleges and universities; a great array of books, ranging from fiction to scholarship; magazines such as *Moment* and *Tikkun*, and much more. It includes the new pride (and sometimes militancy) of Orthodoxy and the inclusion of Orthodox concerns on the general Jewish agenda. It is represented in a significant shift in both style and priorities within the organized community, from the greater funding of Jewish education to the observance of *kasbrut* and *shabbat* at public communal functions.

Then came the nineties, opening with the devastating news of the National Jewish Population Survey. Was the whole Jewish renewal movement, in all its phases, both too little and too late? Such qualitative observers as Charles Silberman and Leonard Fein, celebrators of the spirit of renewal, were now swept aside by dour figures-don't lie predictions based on the ever-increasing rates of intermarriage, the surprisingly low rate of conversions to Judaism, and the high dropout rate of Jews themselves.

The fear begins to mount that Jewish counterculture types are our version of aging hippies, that the "new" and supposedly dynamic Judaism of the *havurot* and *minyanim* is in fact serving only a small closed group of rabbis' kids and alumni of Jewish summer camps. Even a day-school education is viewed as far from inoculation against intermarriage as we raise a generation that lives in a very nearly unbounded open society (for upwardly mobile and educated whites, which happens to include most Jews).

That is why we are afraid. We see a decline in numbers, in loyalty, in knowledge. Those of us raised in this tradition were taught to value one *mitzvah* over all others: ושננתם לבניך, "Teach them to your children." Even among Jews where there was, in fact, rather little left to pass on, the transmission of heritage, especially in the years following the Holocaust, was the greatest imperative of Jewish life. We were raised to see ourselves as a link between our parents and our children, our grandparents and our grandchildren, passing a

legacy from each generation to the next. In Jewish families all over this country there is a feeling that the chain is being broken. We stand dumfounded as we see whole limbs falling off the tree, the end of Judaism or Jewish awareness in branches of our own families.

If Judaism is going to survive in this country, it will do so because it meets the needs of new generations of entirely American Jews, including Jews who have some non-Jewish relatives and ancestors on their family trees. Rail as one may against this utilitarian/psychological approach (“They should be serving God—or standing loyal to tradition—rather than having their ‘needs’ met...”), those who work in any form of outreach to younger Jews know it to be true. These needs are partly social and communitarian, the need for small community and intimacy in the face of mass society; partly familial and recreational, the need for “safe” day-care for toddlers and high-quality squash and tennis courts for upper-middle class Jews and their friends. But above all the need Judaism can answer is the *spiritual* one, a dimension of life that continues to have great and perhaps even increasing significance in American life.

The term “spirituality” is one with which most Jewish thinkers, including rabbis, were quite uncomfortable only a decade ago. Imported into English from the French chiefly by Roman Catholics, it seemed to Jews to evoke monastic life, otherworldliness, and the awesome silences of vast, dark cathedrals, all so alien to the values and experiences of children of East European Jews. Increasingly, it has come to be associated with Eastern forms of meditation and the tremendous influence they have had on Americans over the course of recent decades.

If these associations with “spirituality” were strange and alien even to rabbis, the generally more secular communal activists and “doers” standing at the helm of Jewish organizational life saw them as dangerously solipsistic, a self-absorbed turn inward that would lead to fragmentation rather than to greater communal strength.

In fact, the only Jewish group that was well-poised to deal with the needs of many Jews in this era was HaBaD. For the Lubavitch *hasidim*, “spirituality” translated precisely into *rukhnuyes (rubaniyyut)*,³ a well-known term in Hasidic parlance, and precisely that which Hasidism had to offer. This Jewish version of spirituality meant a life devoted to *avoides (avodat) ha-shem*, the service of God, but marked by an inward intensity (*kavone; kavvanah*) leading to attachment to God (*dveykes; devequt*) and ultimately to the negation (*bitel; bittul*) of all else. Of course, for the HaBaDnik, as for any *hasid*, this *avoides* was to be carried out through the usual Jewish means of Torah and *mitsvot*, including full commitment to the halakhic way of life.

Hasidism, in other words, comprises a Jewish version of the “spirituality” that so many in America are seeking. It does so, however, in a way that insists upon uncompromised acceptance of traditional norms, a way of life attractive to a few but probably impossibly alienating to most young American Jews in the twenty-first century. It is hard to believe that we are to build the Jewish future by a return to the life patterns (including role of women? style of leadership? norms of dress?) belonging to the eighteenth or early nineteenth century. This “Amish” pattern for Jewish survival is the way of a few hardy souls who join the core of those raised within it, but it offers little attraction for the many.

But let us return to “spirituality.” Now that we have found a Jewish language for it, let us examine more closely what it means and why it has so much become the cry of our age. Spirituality is a view of religion that sees its primary task as cultivating and nourishing the human soul or spirit. Each person, according to this view, has an inner life that he or she may choose to develop; this “inwardness” (*penimiyyut* in Hebrew) goes deeper than the usual object of psychological investigation and cannot fairly be explained in Freudian

3. I render the terms here both in the Yiddish colloquial of Hasidic speech and in the more “proper” Sephardic and accepted scholarly versions.

or other psychological terms. Ultimately, it is “transpersonal,” reaching deeply into the self but then extending through an inward reach beyond the individual and linking him/her to all other selves (to all other Jews, the *hasidim* would say) and to the single Spirit or Self of the universe we call God. God is experientially accessible through the cultivation of this inner life, and awareness (*da’at*) of that access is a primary value of religion. External forms, important as they are, serve as instruments for the development, disciplining, and fine-tuning of this awareness. The *hasid* may see them as divinely ordained forms, but still recognizes that they are a means (indeed, a gift of God to help us in our struggle), but not an end in themselves.

Such is, in fact, the shared theology of vast numbers of seekers in our era. Though pursuing the quest through a great variety of symbols and traditions, *we* contemporary seekers are joined by a series of shared sensitivities that transcends the differences between our various systems of expression. We understand “being religious” not primarily as commitment to particular symbols or even as faith in a specific set of principles, but as openness to a deep well of inner experience. This includes experiences in nature, in solitude, those induced by meditation and silence, or some quite spontaneous. Moments like these offer us insight into the wholeness of being, expressed by Hasidic tradition as the realization that “the whole earth is filled with His glory” or “there is no place devoid of Him,” but by Hindu and Buddhist philosophy without reference to God as “that which is, is.”

It is the truth of such moments, translated into teachings through one language or another, that nourishes our lives as seekers, that gives us the strength to go forward. It is the love for and unity with all creation in such moments (whether those are moments experienced, imagined, or merely striven for) that underlie our ethical and moral lives and tell us how to live.

Whether our spirituality is Jewish or Christian, Buddhist or eclectic New Age, you will probably hear us talking about living in harmony with natural forces, following the voice of our deepest inward nature, and seeking to shape a human society that appreciates more and destroys/consumes less of nature's bounty, or of God's gifts. There is beginning to emerge a shared spiritual language of this age, one that transcends the borders of the traditions in which we live and where we may have gained our original impetus toward the spiritual life.

Together, we share a sense that the world urgently needs this new spirituality; we are as committed to it as we are to our individual traditions. Living in an age of ecological crisis, we understand that nothing is more important for humanity than a shared religious language, reaching across the borders of traditions, that will make us more sensitive to the natural and physical world in which we live, which is itself the domain of the sacred. In the coming century, all the religions will have to be drawn upon to create such a language in order to transform human consciousness for the very survival of our world.

This "new" universal spirituality of the late twentieth century is most commonly lightly dressed in Indian or Tibetan garb and thus accompanied by belief in reincarnation, karma, and various charts of spiritual energies or stages in the process of enlightenment. Western elements, too, are added to the mix of this ever-evolving raiment in which the spirit is to be clothed. The commonality of theological and ultimately experiential sub-structure across religious and cultural lines also makes it possible for some seekers (and not only those to be dismissed as "flighty" or unstable) either to turn from one tradition to another in the course of a lifelong quest or to combine elements that seem (at least to the outsider) to originate in entirely different and even contradictory social and historical contexts.

Over the course of some thirty years as a Jew committed to my own form of religious quest within Judaism, I have met many Jews who have chosen or needed to explore their spiritual lives through a variety of non-Jewish, mostly Eastern spiritual paths. Among them I have come upon some remarkably profound, honest, and open seekers. I urge us to see such seekers not as “apostates” or as rejecters of Judaism, nor as the duped victims of “cults” (though such do exist; they come in Eastern, Christian, and even Jewish versions), but as Jews loyal to at least one aspect of our people’s most ancient ways.

Among the spiritually wandering Jews I have met over these three decades are faithful children of Abraham, doing for themselves what we are taught our first ancestor did. They have rejected the superficial idolatries of their own time and place (those of Washington, Hollywood, and Madison Avenue; even those of complacent, semi-assimilationist suburban Judaism, rather than those of Ashur and Ur) and have gone off to the desert, seeking in it the secret places that flow with milk and honey. Though the terrain they explore may be alien and sometimes even objectionable to us, their need to do so and the growth that takes place over the course of such exploration should be familiar and not entirely surprising to us as Jews. Given the generally low level of spiritual seriousness in most liberal synagogues in our country, it is little wonder that Jewish seekers feel a need to turn elsewhere in quest of profound religious truth.

For the generations born or raised since the end of the Second World War, religious quest has been prominent among Americans in a way it had not been earlier. This is true among Jews in somewhat higher numbers, but it is true of general culture as well. Such serious students of American cultural norms as Peter Berger, Robert Bellah, and Martin Marty have tried to document and explain this phenomenon. The attraction of Americans to serious religion in recent years runs the whole gamut, from fundamentalist and evangelical Christianity to

the quasi-Eastern, from charismatic Catholicism and HaBaD Judaism to the New Age and experimental in all (and no) traditions. Among Jews it includes *ba'aley teshuvah*, those who have found their way into a more intense and spiritual, but also more observant, Jewish life; and the much larger group who have turned elsewhere for their spiritual satisfaction, sometimes to Christianity and a neo-Sufi version of Islam, but primarily to Eastern religions. Generationally this group runs from Allen Ginsberg and Baba Ram Dass (a.k.a. Richard Alpert), now in their mid-60s, who came of age in the 1950s, to students currently on campus and living near campus in such centers as Berkeley and Santa Cruz, California, Cambridge and Northampton, Massachusetts, and several points in between.

Why has this generation turned so much to seeking? Some of it has to do with being the first to grow up in the aftermath of both Holocaust and Hiroshima. Life in the nuclear shadow has given us an insecurity paralleled in few earlier generations. As in the aftermaths of previous cataclysms of human history, life seems particularly precarious. Pictures of mass burial pits and endless bodies again inhabit our imagination. The notion that at any time some lunatic (for a while he was even named “Dr. Strangelove!”) might come along and “push the button” has forced us to reach somewhere for ultimate meaning. We need something that will enable us to go forward, to bring children into the world and work to improve human life, even in this ever-so-threatened generation. The shift over the past decade from nuclear war to ecological disaster as the focus of our fears has not essentially changed this situation.

A second motivating factor in the search for meaning among American Jews is surely the high level of material success that many have attained over the course of these four generations. As members of the financially highest-achieving ethnic or religious group (on a per capita basis) in this society, we are brought face-

to-face with questions of values and priorities. “Is this all there is?” we find ourselves asking. Wealth, achievement, and glamour do not in themselves bring happiness or fulfillment, as a significant portion of our newly active Jewish leadership has found. They also do not protect us from the personal crises that most require spiritual meaning. Wealthy and powerful Jews still face death, infirmity, divorce, alienation between parents and children, even the ennui and emptiness that ensue when you seem to run out of deals to make, resorts to visit, entertainments to enjoy, obstacles to conquer. Life as to have some greater meaning, some value beyond that of our own seemingly endless, and ultimately somehow trivial, achievements.

Where do we seekers turn for such an ultimate value? Prior generations might have had an easier time believing in a God who had supreme power over His creation, and was thus the source or guarantor of absolute values. But that sort of religion is hard for us. Will we trust a Deity who did not prevent the Holocaust (or slaughter in Rwanda, starvation in Ethiopia, or the AIDS epidemic) to reenter history and save us from destruction at our own hand? Conventional Western-type faith in an all-powerful Creator God seems difficult unless it is explained in a highly sophisticated—and somehow compromised—fashion. No wonder that it is rejected by large numbers of seekers, including many Jews.

On the other hand, the well-known Western alternative to religious faith seems even more discredited. Our trust in humanity, and especially in the modern pseudo-religion of scientific progress and the conquest of evil through systematic human knowledge, is severely tested in the late twentieth century. Our memories include Nazi scientists in the land of reason and morality, emerging in the century after the Categorical Imperative and Absolute Spirit. It is hard, even fifty years later, to believe in the “progress” wrought by modernity and its achievements. Added to these are the economics

and politics that complicate and often corrupt the “pure” advance of scientific thinking. We are happy to support science’s advance, to be sure, especially insofar as it alleviates suffering and contributes to the world’s survival. But we cannot turn to it as a source of ultimate values.

Today’s seeker is one who takes the accomplishments of science for granted; the old battles between the religious and scientific world views on life’s origins read to us like ancient history. But we also understand that we need not look to the scientific community as our provider of meaning. Often we try to broaden the scope of science by integrating into it the wisdom of the ancients, whether in accepting traditional Chinese and homeopathic medicine or in speaking about rungs of consciousness that may preserve memories of countless past lives and generations, much like the rungs of the tree or molecules of DNA preserve genetic “memory.”

There has been a sense throughout this period that we needed to be rescued by another source of truth, by some deeply rooted wisdom attuned more closely to the moral and spiritual needs of a much battered humankind. Over the course of these past several decades, that source of truth has mostly been the wisdom of the East, in various Indian, Japanese, and, most prominently in recent years, Tibetan forms. The insecurity of the West about its own achievement, including the basis of its moral life, makes us more open (and not for the first time) to learning from other civilizations. The heart of this Eastern teaching is a profound non-dualism, an acceptance of all that is, and a timelessness, fostered by meditative silence, that allows one to transcend daily worries great and small. When seen anew from the heights of this compassionate yet detached mindset, life regains the value it had lost in the battle-scarred decades of violence and degradation through which all of us have lived.

We far fewer seekers who have made Judaism the path of our quest find some similar and some different formulations. We, too, look toward the contemplative and inward portions of our tradition; “Jewish Meditation,” reconstructed from many fragments of nearly lost practices, has elicited great interest in recent years.⁴ The theological language to which we are attracted is largely that of the mystical tradition, though few would find it accurate to designate ourselves as “Kabbalists” in a literal sense. It is the abstract notion of Deity, combined with the richness of metaphor and symbol, that makes the Kabbalah attractive. The highly simplified mystical language of the early Hasidic sources, one that speaks of fullness and emptiness, of the ever-elusive God beyond and the spirit of Godliness that fills all existence, seems especially well-suited to the contemporary need. Most have found that regular patterns of observance, especially the rhythms of *shabbat* and weekday, of life according to the sacred calendar, offer unfathomable spiritual rewards.

These seekers include those who have “gone all the way” and joined Hasidic or other ultra-Orthodox communities and others who have sought a less rigid structure, often gravitating toward Reconstructionist or “Jewish Renewal” circles. At their best, the latter have sought to create a “maximalist” version of liberal Judaism, as intense as Orthodoxy in its demands but more universalistic in perspective, emphasizing a renewed prophetic commitment and Judaism’s demand for justice and care for the downtrodden as key portions of that maximalist agenda. Whether such a “muscular” and demanding liberal Judaism can take hold is a key question in thinking about our collective future.

4. It would be interesting to make a study of “Jewish mediation” as a growth industry over the course of the past twenty years. The bibliography in Mark Verman’s recent book, *The History and Varieties of Jewish Meditation* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996), would be a good place to start. Such a study would be an object lesson in the interpenetrating influence of Orthodox Kabbalists (Aryeh Kaplan), critical Judaica scholars (Moshe Idel), and New Age teachers (Zalman Schachter), all in the shadow of the growth of Eastern meditational practices in the West during this period.

The serious seeker, today as always, is open to taking on spiritual disciplines, even of the most rigorous kind. *We are not talking about an easy push-a-button or drop-a-pill experience-craving pseudo-spirituality, one that seeks only “highs” and takes no responsibility for the deep valleys that lie between the peak experiences.*⁵ All the traditions recognize that discipline and regularity of practice are essential building-blocks of the spiritual life. Their routine and the very ordinariness of doing them day after day, even when they seem empty, provide the counterpoint to the spiritual mountaintops of great insight that appear occasionally in their midst. But the disciplines we seek, whether old or new, are those that seem helpful to us, those that offer us the tools and framework within which to engage in the task of spiritual growth and self-development that each of us must ultimately face alone. When a practice is there just because it is traditional, done that way just because it always has been, today’s seeker may be expected to question. Turn as we do to ancient paths of wisdom, we inevitably remain late twentieth-century Americans, for better and for worse: practical, somewhat impatient, wanting a hand in shaping things, not content simply to accept them and pass them on. We are open to hard work, but for our efforts we expect to get results.

A number of years ago my family and I were living in Berkeley, California. Around the corner from us was, of course, a spiritual or New Age bookstore. The front of the store was decorated with a huge sign, in inverted pyramid form. The top line read, in large block letters: SCIENTOLOGY DOESN’T WORK. Beneath that, in slightly smaller letters, it said: INTEGRAL YOGA DOESN’T WORK.

5. The emphasis here is an address to several friends, thinkers and writers who are my seniors by a generation, who continue to attack the recovery of spiritual life in Judaism in the most distorting terms. Let me make it quite clear to them that neither I nor any responsible voice I know is advocating 1) the abandonment of commitment to social justice; 2) a drug-like euphoria in which we lose any sense of borders, and therefore the ability to distinguish right from wrong; 3) entering closed havurah-cloisters where we will ignore the rest of the Jewish community and leave it to its sorry fate.

Then, again slightly smaller: CHRISTIANITY DOESN'T WORK. After going through six or seven more would-be spiritual paths the sign concluded, again in large letters: YOU WORK. Seeing this sign reminded me of a definition of Hasidism that Abraham Joshua Heschel had passed on in the name of the Kotsker rebbe. When asked what Hasidism was all about, Rabbi Mendel of Kotsk replied: "*Arbetn oif zikh*"—"to work on yourself."

Being a seeker means understanding that there is work to do. In the first instance this is spiritual work, which means the transformation of the self, opening oneself to become a channel through which divine light shines or cosmic energy flows. this work requires a training of the mind in the twin tasks of awareness and responsiveness. Awareness, *da'at* in the Hasidic sources, means a knowing and constant remembering that all things and moments contain the Presence, that everything can lead us back to the one. It is intellectual, to be sure, but an act of mind colored with all the eros of the first Biblical meaning of "to know," as the Hasidic sources not infrequently remind us. Responsiveness is that state cultivated over years of inward prayer or meditation, where the heart is always half open, ever ready to respond to the lightest knock on its gate by the Beloved.

I inevitably the seeker in these generations has also to deal with the question of the relationship between personal and societal transformation. Each of us feels challenged by the social ills that still surround us: poverty, racism, injustice, the destruction of the planet. Few would say these matters are of no concern. Even the Eastern religions, often stereotyped in the West as totally unconcerned with alleviating the sufferings of this world on the material plane, begin to take on a measure of worldly and practical responsibility when imported and reshaped by Westerners. All of us who seek, no matter how specific our symbol system or spiritual language, are universalist in our concern for humanity and its earthly home.

The question for us is often one of priorities and faith in our own capabilities to effect change. Should I spend my time in demonstrations or political party work to change the opinions of others, or should I work first to make sure my own inner garden is free of weeds? Given the shortness of my life and the limits of my strength, where should I put my energies? These questions are unresolved for many a contemporary seeker; most of us tend to shuttle back and forth among priorities as our lives go on and as specific demands present themselves.

We also very much seek religious community. The lone work each of us has to do cannot thrive without the support and understanding of others. But the communities we need have to be made up of those who understand and share our search. The American synagogue, even at its best, seldom had that character in the previous generation. It was too concerned with propriety, respectability, and public image to be very welcoming to those few and often “different” Jews who were seeking on the spiritual plane. That is beginning to change in some places as a new generation of rabbis and synagogue leaders are discovering the seeker in one another. Many synagogues have been quietly remade in recent years into warm and supportive communities that in havurah-like fashion serve as extended family to their members. The next step for communities like these is to seek out the seekers and make room for them, working with them to create a shared language of personal religious expression.

Judaism is not is not an easy path for the contemporary seeker, even if it happens to be his or her ancestral tradition. The reasons for this are manifold and the mix varies from person to person, but it behooves us to examine a few of the serious stumbling blocks that lie in our way as we think about educating for a Jewish future with the potential spiritual seeker in mind.

First are the external difficulties. Judaism is a highly verbal tradition, and its language is Hebrew. Nobody says that you have to learn Pali or Tibetan or Japanese to be a good Buddhist. True, those are the languages of scripture, commentary, and the contemporary faith-communities. But texts may be translated, as many have been, and a language-and-culture barrier to the native Buddhist cultures of Asia may in fact help in the Western Buddhist's somewhat naive recreation of the faith, rather than harm or challenge it.

Significantly, few of the Eastern teachers who have come to the West in recent decades have insisted that their Western disciples learn the languages, fully absorb the practices, or assimilate culturally to the world from which their teachings came. They are realistic in this regard; recognizing the cultural distance involved, they have chosen to "go native" in the West and create indigenous forms of Buddhist or Hindu spirituality, very much a mirror image of what Roman Catholicism learned to do in Mexico or in parts of Africa.

For Judaism, particularly because our traditional mentality was so shaped by oppression, minority status, and the struggle for group survival, such transcendence of the cultural/ethnic context is almost unthinkable. To do the Jewish spiritual life seriously, you really do have to know Hebrew. Our prayer traditions are highly verbal and tied to the intricacies of language, so that they just don't work in translation. So much of our teaching, including the deepest insights of the mystical and Hasidic sources, is caught up in plays and nuances of language that translation of such sources, while it is to be increased and encouraged, will never quite be adequate.

Because we are right here in the West, the seeker living cheek-by-jowl with various ongoing Jewish communities, it is all the more difficult to create a Judaism of one's own. There seems always to be someone down the street or in one's synagogue (sometimes even if you are the rabbi!) telling you that what you have is not authentic, not Judaism as it once was and ever should be. The Havurah/Jewish Renewal movement has tried to fight this, creating

small independent communities that are neo-traditional in form but often quite revolutionary in hierarchy of values. Unfortunately, these, too, have undergone a certain weakening as the sixties have turned into the eighties and nineties. Such communities constantly need to examine whether they are truly agents of positive change and rebalanced Jewish intensification for their members, or whether they have not become convenient clubs for those who want *less*, rather than more, of one or another (including the financial!) sort of commitment. In recent years those communities have suffered from the well-known struggles of new communities in our society over issues of leadership and empowerment: Does “egalitarianism” mean that those with more experience or greater knowledge of the tradition should not serve as teachers and leaders for those who come seeking to learn?

But a new commitment to Judaism as a spiritual path involves deeper problems as well. I alluded earlier to the question of God and the use of the word “God” in a contemporary spirituality. Now we have to examine this question more closely. It is clear that a person can have a spiritual life without believing in God. That is precisely what Buddhism provides, at least on a rarefied theoretical level; I daresay that is a major reason why it is attractive to so many Jews. The emphasis of Buddhist spiritual training is on attentiveness, on attitude, on an approach to reality rather than on a personal Subject who is the goal of one’s spiritual life. By contrast, even the most spiritualized form of Judaism is focused on knowing, loving, and obeying God in one way or another. Is it in any way conceivable that one seek to have a *Jewish* spiritual life without “believing in God?”

Let us not rush in too quickly with our negative answers; the question is more complex than it appears, and a contemporary response requires a good deal of subtlety. How do we reply to the Jewish seeker who says:

“Yes, I am a religious person. I believe in the oneness of all being. I feel a connection to something eternal and infinite that is present in my own soul and in yours. That’s what my quest is all about. But I can’t call it “God.” That means that I don’t consider it to be a willful, personal being. It is not *someone* I want to worship, someone to whom I can address prayers. Certainly the language of the synagogue, that of God as King of Kings and myself as His supplicating servant, is not one I like or see any reason to adopt.”

Or to another who says:

“I am grateful for the inordinate gifts that nature has bestowed on me. I have health, sustenance, meaningful work, a loving partner, friends and family. Sometimes when I walk on a beach or am alone outdoors on a beautiful day I feel overwhelmed by gratitude and by a sense of inadequacy to express the fullness with which I feel blessed. That is about as close as I can come to prayer. But the prayer that wells up in me at such moments is addressed to life itself and to no one in particular, surely not to “God.” And all this has nothing to do with the synagogue, the cantor and choir, or uncomprehended Hebrew chants that feel like they come from another time and another place.”

These are not at all the voices of the Jewish atheist of a couple of generations ago, the “old left” Marxist sympathizer who believed that religion was the opiate of the masses and wanted no part of God, synagogue, or religious life. We are confronted now with a *religious* agnosticism (and sometimes atheism) on a massive scale. Does Judaism have the resources to respond to such a generation? Or will it leave these seekers to turn elsewhere, concentrating its efforts on those who do not question or who have found a way, *usually because of long-standing emotional commitments and the ability to reinterpret texts almost automatically (rather than because of truly different beliefs)*, to stay within the fold of Jewish forms of expression?

A Judaism for the seeker in this generation will have to reexamine a number of givens of our tradition. How certain are

we that we need insist on the personalist metaphors, mostly those of male parent and ruler, that have constituted the heart of Jewish prayer-language for so many generations? The theology of *Avinu Malkenu*, God as Father and King, is problematic not only because of the single-genderedness of these terms. We in this psychological age understand the divine parent as a projection, a cosmic superego figure that we impose upon ourselves and accept because of our felt need for an externalized center of societal and individual self-control. But once we let that cat out of the bag, the control no longer works as well. Once I lose my naivete about God as Father, it is hard for me to use those words again, to fully reenter the now broken myth.

It is true that *becoming* a father helped me bridge the gap for many years. The realization that God loved me in the same way that I loved my then-helpless infant child from the moment I saw her did much to sustain in me the language of Jewish faith. But it is hard to leave faith in the hands of the volatile parental metaphor, one toward which we all have a complicated network of emotional reactions and which changes profoundly as we go through the course of our lives. And “King” is even harder than “Father” in a world where kings no longer radiate ancient glory, but are either powerless figureheads, dresses once a year in garb of state, or else petty despots who remind us mostly of the ugliness rather than the glory of earlier times.

Of course, classical Judaism had other metaphors for God. The Beloved, the God of such Kabbalistic poetry as *Lekha Dodi* or *Yedid Nefesh*, is a tempting one to seek to restore. But here, too, I hesitate. The same question of the possibility of religious language in a psychologically self-conscious age comes directly to the fore. God as Cosmic Lover will work in some very special moments. We will always find ourselves on guard, however, asking about what it means to long for the Lover of the Song of Songs when the “real” issues of love and erotic self-fulfillment are so painfully obvious to us on another level. The fact that we are a tradition without monasticism or celibacy must also mean that we are one that cannot be naive about

love. We may have exhausted the resources of our old language for speaking both to and of God. We may need to create a new language, as the Kabbalists did in the Middle Ages. Meanwhile, perhaps we should say: "Unto You Silence is Praise." Silence may create in us the condition out of which a new prayer-language might be born.

We will also have to ask ourselves how fully wedded we are to the vertical metaphor for the divine/human relationship, one that almost completely dominates in our classical sources. By the "vertical metaphor I mean the notion that God dwells "in heaven," while we humans are "down below" on earth. This notion is, of course, derived from ancient beliefs about the gods as sky dwellers. As mature and sophisticated in our faith as we may think we are, it is difficult for us to outgrow entirely the notion of "God above," an idea that god "resides" in some vague place on the other side of the sky. Every time we read a Psalm about "God in heaven" or tell the tale of Moses ascending the mountain to reach God, we reinforce the myth of verticality. We do so also by such abstractions as referring to someone who is "on a very high rung" of spiritual attainment or even negatively by referring to someone who is not serious about religion, but merely trying to "get high."

I am not one who believes that we can or should get rid of all the vertical metaphors in our religious tradition. We would be terribly impoverished, and for no good reason. But it is important to see through this language and thus to be freed of its total hold on us. We can do so most easily by turning to the other great metaphor of religious tradition, that of inwardness. Rather than seeing all humanity climbing up the great mountain, let us imagine ourselves as journeying down into the depths, seeking to draw water from our innermost well. Instead of ascending rung after trying rung, we are peeling off level after level of externals, reaching toward a more inward, deeper vision of the universe. Of course, this, too, is a

metaphor, but the presence of a second way of seeing our journey helps to release us from the singular hold of the first.

But once we have let ourselves question the vertical metaphor of our ancient cosmology, a great deal more is questioned as well. The God above might come down onto the mountain once, at a particular place and time, to talk with those gathered there. Since God is outside the world, revelation is a unique and unusual event. But can the God within, the one who speaks to every human heart, have the same relationship of “choosing” with the Jewish people? If God is none other than the innermost heart of reality, is not all of being equally an emanation of the same divine Self? Is Judaism not just the human symbolic language into which we Jews render the universal, inward God’s silent, pre-verbal speech, just as others translate it into verbal symbols of their own heritage? And can the internal God be the source of authority in the same way as the Fellow on top of the mountain, the One who could, according to the Midrash, hold it over our heads, even as we agreed to receive Torah, saying: “If not, here you will be buried”?

Most basically, it would seem that the God within is not *other* than ourselves in the same clear way as the God above. The vertical metaphor allowed for distance: “if you do not do good I will turn far away, rising to the seventh heaven, far beyond your ability to reach Me.” But the hidden God buried deep within the self feels more like one who ever longs to be discovered, and the process of finding God is not to be clearly distinguished from the deepest levels of self-discovery. What we are likely to find is the truth of the mystics: The individual self and the cosmic Self are one. The Judaism that will emerge from a turn inward will then be something like a version of what Aldous Huxley and others have called the *philosophia perennis*, a single truth that underlies all religions, though expressed and taught in the specific symbolic language of the Jewish tradition.

The theology that will speak to today's seekers will be a Jewish non-dualism, a spiritual vision that seeks to transcend the most basic barriers between God and world, self and other. This is not the religion of God the Creator, who fashions a world outside Himself and sits over it in judgment. It is rather that of God the One who enters into the dance of multiplicity, who dons the coat of many colors and thus is to be found and discovered throughout the world, amid the great richness and diversity of existence.

This is also not the religion of God the Revealer in its classic form: The God who makes manifest His arbitrary will, backed by threat of punishment and promise of reward. Rather it is the God of that beautiful maiden dwelling in the castle who, according to the Zohar, reveals a bit of her face to the lover who passes by her gate day after day.⁶ *We discover ever more of God's self and will as we seek to live in God's presence.* Torah is not a finite body of laws and teachings, codified in details of praxis down to the *n*th degree. It is rather an endless well of wisdom, present in the texts, commentaries, and traditions of our ancestors, to be sure, but living in us only because we keep our hearts open by our own practice. It is the presence of divine energy that we find within, renewed each day, that makes our teachings living Torah and not dead letter.

The first Hasidic masters knew this well and taught it unceasingly. That voice was mostly lost in later Hasidism's rush to preserve tradition.⁷ But it is our task to recover and renew that voice. It should speak out from within a deep commitment to practice

6. Zohar 2:99a-b. Included in Daniel Matt's *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* (New York: Paulist, 1983), p. 124f.

7. A particularly interesting and dynamic notion of Oral Torah, as a teaching fashioned of the deeds of the righteous in each generation, is to be found in the *Sefat Emet*, a key Hasidic work by Rabbi Judah Leib Alter of Ger (1847-1904). My edition of that work, including selected texts, translations, and contemporary personal responses, is soon to appear through the Jewish Publication Society.

and love of tradition, warning nevertheless against Judaism's greatest inner danger: the overly zealous commitment to detail and form. This zeal can sometimes result in a loss of broader perspective and deeper openness, even the openness to God.

This God is also not one who redeems as the traditional metaphor depicts it, looking down from the heights of heaven to lift Israel from Egypt or to send a messiah who will save the world from humanity's worst violent and self-destructive urges. We speak rather of a God who dwells within the unquenchable spark of freedom that lives within every human heart, the one who inspires the Moses in us to rebel against every Pharaoh. It is the divine voice in us that calls us to maintain our undying faith in the full liberation of humanity, in both flesh and spirit. It is through our deeds that God brings about redemption, being manifest within us and triumphing over our own desires to escape and avoid the true fulfillment of our divine/human selves.

What I am proposing for the Jewish seeker, deriving from my own quest which is essentially similar to his or hers, though conducted within the sphere of our own people's religious language, is a Jewish *mystical humanism*. It is humanistic in that I believe humans are the essential actors in the historical, political, and social spheres. For better or worse, it is we who are charged with the task of saving this world, we who are also the agents of the world's destruction. In this drama, there is no *deus ex machina* who will protect us from ourselves. But it is very much a mystical or spiritual humanism, not secular in any way. On the contrary, I seek to expand the bounds of the holy, to find the One manifest everywhere, to understand that each of us is not just a separate willful being but a unique spark of that single divine light. It is by finding those sparks in one another and drawing their light together that we discover and articulate the deeper truth about this world in which we live. That truth understands that there is ultimately only one Being, present

in each of us, longing to know its own source and draw together the uniqueness of each being and the singularity of the Source from which we all come and to which we all return.

“Why do it through Judaism?” the seeker often asks. My answer comes not in absolutist terms; it cannot, Judaism is a hard path, but one toward which we have a special obligation. We have just been through an age that sought to turn its back on many of the most profound and ancient of human teachings. Modernity “knew better” than the wisdom of prior generations, and traditional ways of knowing and living were cast onto the trash heap of history. The era emerging is one that seeks to rediscover truths long neglected; we are more willing now, and will be more still in the next century, to relearn this wisdom of great antiquity and depth. This age will need the energies and teachings contained in *all* the great and venerable traditions of humanity.

Among these are perhaps eight or ten truly great religious traditions, developed over the course of human history. Several of them have hundreds of millions of followers. We, diminished both by genocide and assimilation, are a small people bearing a great tradition. Most of its heirs do not care about this legacy. Some who do love it so much and hold on so tightly that they cannot let it move forward into the new and universal age that stands before us. And so I would say: If you were born a Jew, or if you are drawn to Judaism, perhaps it is not just by chance. Perhaps what the human future needs of you is your reading of, your encounter with, this great portion of our shared spiritual legacy. You can raise up sparks that belong to your soul alone, reveal worlds that can be found by no other. The tradition waits for you to discover it.

Our sages say that Abraham the seeker was like a man wandering from place to place when he came upon a *בירה דולקת*, a burning tower. Can it be, said the seeker, that the tower has no master? Then the master peered out and said: “I am the master of the

tower.” The term הציץ, “peered out, “ leaves no doubt that it was from within the tower itself that the master revealed his face to the wanderer. Abraham discovers that this world, in the very midst of its conflagration, contains the divine presence. Is it any wonder that my teacher, the late Abraham Joshua Heschel, when he told this story in one of his books,⁸ intentionally mistranslated the phrase to mean “a tower full of light?” We find God in the light, in the beauty of life in this world, as we find God in the fire, in our world’s suffering and conflagration.

Finding divinity within the world will lead us toward the understanding that God (YHWH in Hebrew) and being (YHWH) are One and the same, two perspectives on the same reality. We will come to see that even this most basic of all dualities, the distinction between God and world or God and self, is less than the whole of truth. Thus the *bet* of בראשית will be replaced by *aleph*, the *aleph* of אנכי, I am,” the beginning of the Ten Commandments. This restored *aleph* will also turn out to be that of אהיה, “I shall be,” the one that returns our hope and renews our future.

It is also, as it happens, the *aleph* of אברהם, Abraham, the father of all Jews and all seekers. May the seekers of today be faithful children of that earliest father, not only in questing after truth, but also in seeking to pass their truth on to future generations. In this way, our ancient legacy will not be lost but infinitely enriched and renewed by this generation of seekers, as we live it, reshape it, and help it continue to grow.



8. *God in Search of Man* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1959), p. 112–113, n. 6, and p. 367.

About the Author

Arthur Green is the Philip W. Lown Professor of Jewish Thought at Brandeis University. He is both a historian of Jewish religion and a theologian; his work seeks to serve as a bridge between these two distinct fields of endeavor.

Educated at Brandeis and at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Dr. Green has taught Jewish mysticism, Hasidism and theology to several generations of students at the University of Pennsylvania, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (where he served as both Dean and President), and now at Brandeis University. He also taught and lectured widely throughout the Jewish community of North America as well as in Israel, where he visits frequently. He was the founder of Havurat Shalom in Somerville, Massachusetts, and remains a leading independent figure in the Havurah or Jewish Renewal movement.

Dr. Green is the author of several books. Best-known among these are *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* and *Seek My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology*, where he turns to the mystical tradition as a key source for a religious language that will speak to the many spiritual seekers in our generation. His most scholarly work, entitled *Keter: The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism*, is soon to be published by Princeton University Press. His translation and contemporary comment on Hasidic teachings will appear in *Honest Talk: The Sefat Emet of R. Judah Leib of Ger*, forthcoming from the Jewish Publication society.

