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THEOLOGY ISN'T often considered one of the central themes modern Jews discuss. But we are beginning to see an outpouring of interest and creative, original theological thinking in all spheres of Judaism — ranging from Orthodoxy to Reform. We highlight in this issue some new, fertile Jewish writing about God, writing that seeks to illuminate areas as diverse as the environment, feminisim, religious perspectives on homosexuality, pluralism, and interfaith relations. How thinking about God stretches our sense about these and other critical expressions of our lives is the question that links these otherwise wide-ranging, engaging essays.

Inside Theology

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Who Needs Theology?

Neil Gillman

A RECENT ENCOUNTER with a rabbinical student forced me to confront a reality that I had long tried to avoid. We were discussing God: How do we know about God? What can we say about God? and the rest, when the student's hand shot up. "Why are we discussing all of this? What we need from you is some practical help on how to get Jews to have a kosher home or keep Shabbat. Theology is irrelevant."

A personal note: My mature engagement with Judaism came on the wings of theology. I had been a philosophy major at McGill University and comfortable on the periphery of Jewish life when I wandered into a Hillel lecture by Will Herberg. This was the first hint I ever had that Judaism was intellectually stimulating. Maimonides knew Plato and Aristotle! Kaplan had read Dewey! Franz Rosenzweig was a Jewish existentialist! There was a field called Jewish philosophy? That encounter led me to rabbinical school, where I soon realized that my fascination with theological issues was not shared by most of the seminary teachers. I went on for a doctorate in philosophy at Columbia University (the Jewish Theological Seminary did not have a PhD program in those days) and then a career teaching and writing Jewish philosophy and theology.

Early on in my rabbinic studies, a talmudic *sugya* prompted me to comment on the rabbinic concept of God. The instructor, a prominent talmudist, responded, "Mr. Gillman, God yes, God no. What's important in this text is whether or not you put on *tefillin* this morning." (The *sugya* had something to do with *tefillin*.) The response that came to my mind (though not to my lips) was, "Without God, I wouldn't even begin to consider putting on *tefillin*." For me at least, theology — what I more colloquially came to call "doing the head work," — was simply indispensable to my Jewish religious identity. And, as I began to write and teach, my primary goal has been to convince my students and readers that it should be indispensable to them as well.

Bringing theology — and especially revelation — to the core of Jewish identity and identification has proven increasingly frustrating. And yet, how we address revelation determines our views on authority in matters of belief and practice, and how we address authority determines where we locate ourselves in the contemporary Jewish community.

As a Conservative Jew, the issue of revelation is particularly complex. I can neither accept as literally true the claim that God once spoke to our ancestors, nor can I dismiss Sinai as pure fiction. I need to articulate a theology of revelation that permits me to claim that God did reveal the Torah to the Jewish people. But it should also enable me to pursue higher biblical criticism, question the historicity of the pentateuchal narratives, and apply a critical, wide-ranging historicism to the study of Judaism. I support the decisions of the Conservative movement's Committee on Law and Standards that, *inter alia*, permits the marriage of a *kohen* and a divorcee (though that practice is explicitly prohibited in the Torah) and is

The "uncensored rants of Yossi Abramowitz," publisher of *Sh'ma*, on his blog: www.peoplehood.org.

seriously considering the possibility of ordaining gays and lesbians. But intermarriage and patrilineal descent remain forbidden because, to quote the movement's favorite slogan, "we are a halakhic movement!"

I have spent years trying to resolve these sometimes competing understandings of halakhah into a coherent theological position. Franz Rosenzweig, Mordecai Kaplan, and Abraham Joshua Heschel serve as my guides. While I had hoped that my students, my rabbinic colleagues, and at least some lay Conservative Jews would welcome these efforts, I have met with limited success.

My position is roughly the following. I have become increasingly impatient with the claim that Conservative Judaism is "a halakhic movement." If anything, it is a "selectively halakhic movement." It is halakhic when it chooses to be halakhic. Whatever authority we grant halakhah in our lives is grounded not in God, but rather in the communities that crafted Torah in the first place, and now in our own. That position inevitably relativizes halakhic authority. I see no way to avoid that conclusion. But then, I am asked, why keep kosher or observe Shabbat? Answer: because we choose to obligate ourselves. But isn't that Reform? Answer: not if we make different choices.

Originally I had believed that a candid articulation of this position would clarify the movement's ideology. But now I realize my student had been right all along. It's not that my theology is wrong-headed. It is simply irrelevant, first, because it is complicated to teach, much more complicated than the polar positions on the right and on the left. Jews out there just "don't get it," and don't care enough to exert the effort to "get it." Second, they don't need to get it because Jews make their Jewish decisions for many reasons; theology is rarely one of them. It may be important to some few, but certainly not to the vast majority, not even to many of my rabbinic colleagues, which is why this position is rarely explicitly taught, preached, or advocated.

Theology is not only an academic discipline; the sheer experience of living everyday life forces all of us to confront theological issues. It is the responsibility of the rabbi or educator to raise these private ruminations into conscious awareness. In some instances, the process will help clarify a denominational identity. At other times, it may not. But in both cases, the enterprise of doing Jewish theology will be validated.

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Judaism and Creation Theology

Arthur Green

CREATION HAS BEEN the neglected question in modern Jewish theology. Partly because the issue did not fit well with the particularist agenda ("How are we different from our Christian neighbors?"), but also because we feared taking a clear position either supporting or opposing evolutionary theory, Jewish thinkers have remained mostly silent on the subject of life's origins. In contrast to prior ages, when theologies of creation served as the great font of life's meaning, moderns seek to separate the search for meaning from the question of origins. Since we can no longer say that the world was created "for the sake of the righteous," or "for Israel," or "for Torah," we find meaning in a Jewish life that has all too little to say about the big questions of how and why we all got here.

I believe that the urgent ecological agenda of the current century will change that situation quite radically. One of the most important roles of religion in the coming generations will be to affect our behavior with regard to the natural world and its resources. Humanity's very survival demands a reeducation regarding consumption, population control, and a host of other issues — all having to do with our place in the fast-changing balances of the biosphere within which we exist. This conversation will perforce return us to the question of our place in the natural order and the process that led us to our now inescapable responsibility of stewardship over the existence of much more than our own species.

The current debates in some Christian circles about Creationism and Intelligent Design leave most Jews cold. We are not fundamentalists or apologists for untenable theories of origin. Jews have embraced science since the beginning of the modern age; we accept Darwin and the developments of evolutionary biology since his time. It is to physicists rather than Kabbalists (though they sometimes sound similar!) we turn to try to understand

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