

In this Issue

Elul, the month which precedes Rosh Hashanah, is a time when God and Israel are characterized as lovers. No matter what happened the year before, during Elul, God and Israel dare to believe in each other once more. To help us think hard about believing, we asked five talented thinkers to share their beliefs with us on: God, covenant, authority, diaspora and death.

I believe Neil Gillman

I believe, first, that the function of religion is to discern and describe the sense of an ultimate order which pervades the universe and human experience. With that sense of an ordered world intact, we human beings also have a place, we belong, we feel ultimately "at home"; without it, we are in exile, "homeless" and our lives are without meaning. The whole purpose of religion, its liturgies, rituals and institutions, is to highlight, preserve and concretize this sense of cosmos, and to recapture it in the face of the chaos that hovers perpetually around the fringes of our lives as we live them within history.

The Nature of God

I believe that all human characterizations of God are metaphors, borrowed from familiar human experience. Precisely because God transcends all human conceptualization, we can only think of God through metaphors. Our ancestors discovered God in their experience of nature and history. Those experiences, as understood, interpreted

and then recorded in Torah and the rest of our classical literature, serve as the spectacles through which we recapture the experience of God for ourselves. They teach us what to look for, how to see and how to interpret what we see. We discover God, but we invent the metaphors which capture the variegated qualities of our experiences of God. They bring God into our lives and then in turn, help us discover God anew.

Our tradition provides us with a rich kaleidoscopic system of metaphors for God. We appropriate some of these, reject others and add some of our own reflecting our personal experience of God. I accept most of those traditional metaphors--e.g., that God is unique, personal, ultimate yet remarkably vulnerable to human claims, that God creates, reveals and redeems, and that God is the ultimate source and principle of this ordered world-- precisely as metaphors.

Knitted together, these metaphors form the complex Torah myth. This myth provides the structure

of meaning which explains why things--including all of nature and history together with the realities of the human experience in all its complexity--are the way they are for us as Jews.

Covenant

I believe that the covenant is the linchpin of the Jewish myth, the primary metaphor for Jewish self-understanding. But the covenant is itself the implication of a far more subtle characterization of God, what Heschel tried to capture in his use of the term "God's pathos". God entered into a covenant with the Jewish people because ultimately, God cares desperately about creation, about people, and about our social structures. A caring God enters into relationships with communities. The fact that our ancestors used this meta-

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phor for their relationship with God is further testimony to their concern with structure, for it is precisely their sense of covenantedness that led to their further understanding of law as the primary form of Jewish religious expression.

Authority

I believe that the ultimate locus of authority for what we believe and how we practice as Jews is in ourselves. That is the irreversible gift of modernity. I also believe that we can and must voluntarily surrender some of that authority, primarily to our communities, for without community we would be totally bereft (without a *minyan*, I cannot genuinely worship as a Jew), and ultimately to God as we experience God in commanding relationship with us. But we reserve the right to determine how, and in what areas, and to what extent we surrender that authority. In the last analysis, we obligate ourselves.

Diaspora

I believe that one of the necessary implications of the notion of the monotheistic God is that God is accessible to any human being, from any point on earth. The Bible presents various models about how sacred space is created, but one of those models, central to all of later Jewish history, is that it is the Jewish community that sanctifies space simply by determining that it is from this point on earth that we will address God. There is then no overriding *religious* (though there may be a political or social) objection to the claim that we can live fully religious lives as Jews wherever we find ourselves. This is not for a moment to undermine the claim that our historic *national* ties can *best* be fulfilled in a land that is ours. But it also recognizes that the diaspora community, from antiquity to our own day, has contributed richly to the resolution of manifold religious and spiritual issues for Jews throughout the world.

Death and the End of Days

I believe that an inherent part of the way we structure time as Jews must include a vision of the end of days. Creation and eschatology form the parenthesis for the Jewish understanding of time. They characterize the beginning of time and its end, and without a beginning and end, there would be no middle. We would then not know where we stand in the canvas of time, just as a portrait without a frame would lack coherence and integrity. But Jewish eschatology must be understood as part of our mythic structure. As such, it says more about how we are to deal with our lives in the here and now than of what will happen at the end of days. It says that

we must understand that the tensions and outbursts of chaos that we experience in the here and now are an inevitable part of our human experience within history, and that they will be banished in an age that will be the total embodiment of cosmos.

I believe that classical Jewish eschatology invariably structures its vision of the cosmos to come at the end as a recapitulation of the cosmos that was at the beginning. For that reason, the emergence of the doctrine of

"God entered into a covenant with the Jewish people because ultimately, God cares desperately about creation, about people, and about our social structures."

resurrection was an inevitable outcome of the view that death was not part of God's original plan for creation. If death is chaos, then the ultimate embodiment of cosmos will be marked by the death of death, which is the message of the *Had Gadya* hymn with which we conclude

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our Passover Seder, the festive meal which celebrates our earlier redemption.

That at the end, God slaughters the angel of death is, as my teacher Professor Shalom Spiegel used to teach, the culminating victory of the monotheistic idea. If God is truly God, then my death can have no lasting victory over God's power, for God alone enjoys ultimacy. The belief that in time, God will resurrect the dead is also a remarkable testimony to the significance to God of the only lives we have or know, which is as beings incarnate through our bodies in space and time.

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I believe in the triumph of life

Irving Greenberg

I believe with a wholehearted faith that all human beings are created in the image of God and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable dignities among which are infinite value, equality and uniqueness.

I believe with a wholehearted faith that poverty, hunger, oppression (including racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, slavery and all forms of systematized degradation), war, sickness and death are ultimately incompatible with the full dignity of the image of God.

I believe with a wholehearted faith that the human world cannot endure half slave and half free, half hungry and half fed, half neglected and half cared for, half human and half less than human. Therefore, the world must be made whole so that it will fully respect and sustain every image of God. We have a divine promise that this can be achieved.

I believe with a wholehearted faith that all humans are endowed with the divine capacities such as power, consciousness, relationship, freedom and life. It is the task of religion and culture to lovingly help humans to perfect these qualities in imitation of God until the fullness of life is achieved.

The Call to Covenant

I believe with a wholehearted faith that out of love for all creation, out of respect for the dignity of humanity and out of longing for perfection, our loving God has summoned all humans to enter into a divine-human partnership to use their God-given capacities to perfect the world.

I believe with a wholehearted faith that, for both partners, entering into covenant is motivated by love. The validity of the covenant is based on the principle of free negotiations, mutual assumption of duties and full recognition of the equal rights of both parties. From the human perspective, joining the covenant involves the freely given and voluntarily accepted commitment of one's life and efforts to perfect the world.

I believe with a wholehearted faith that in entering into covenant, God fully accepts humans in their humanness. Therefore, the covenantal process of redemption moves at a human pace--typically one step at a time or as fast as people can grow and change. People start the cycle of love, care and equal treatment with their own immediate family, friends and community. Then this commitment is extended outward to the entire people and to the whole world.

I believe with a wholehearted faith that since the task of perfection cannot be accomplished in one generation, the covenant is ultimately a covenant between the generations as well as between God and humanity. Each generation is expected to move the world as far along the way to freedom and plenitude of being as it can. Each person is asked to respect the principles of the final perfection as much as they possibly can now. Each is asked not to take advantage of present privilege to hurt others, not to settle for the status quo, not to abdicate the task by escapism or by dismissing this world as illusion, not to allow the longing for perfection to

so spin out of control as to lead to the destruction of what has been accomplished already. Each human is called to create and raise children (and/or to care for and educate others' children) so that they will grow up to be fully in the image of God and to transmit to them the task of perfecting the world. Thus, the chain of life will not be broken by death and the covenantal task will not be relinquished until the hopes of all are fulfilled.

"I believe with a wholehearted faith that out of love for all creation ... God has summoned all humans to enter into a divine-human partnership ..."