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GOD AND THE WORLD: A JEWISH VIEW

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In the past, most religions considered the dimension of the secular—the world with its pain and imperfection, its pleasures and seductions—as an impediment to the attainment of godliness. In our day, as a reaction to this anti-worldliness, there has been an equally unhealthy tendency for many religionists to lose themselves almost totally in the world and in worldliness. Others, however—among them many raised on the Jewish tradition—believe that the world is neither enemy nor end-in-itself, but the necessary, and potentially holy, milieu in which the spirit realizes itself, in which it takes form. However, even for these people, the inescapability of pain and death, the finiteness of our intelligence, the conflicts of our inner life—are inexplicable and perplexing phenomena which often outrage our deepest sensibilities. Even for them, the physical world poses a grave problem.

Furthermore, it is not only the physical world that poses a problem for religion. The social world with its independent—and often inimical—cultural values, science and aesthetics, often presents an equally formidable challenge. The spirit not only has to defend itself from the attacks of the scientific mind and the aesthetic sensibility, it also has to justify their existence within the divine economy. If the mind destroys faith—and even the belief in the self—why was it created? Why does the “beautiful” co-exist with the “good” as a possible—and idolatrous—object

of man's ultimate loyalties? To put it simply: "worldliness" is often as great a problem to religion as the "world." This is especially true of the religious Jew, who may, on occasion, make his peace with the physical world, but has rarely done so with the cultural values of non-Jewish society.

In the following study the painful—but often creative—conflict between religion and the world, between the holy and the profane, the spiritual order and the secular one—whatever particular antinomy is preferred—will be considered from a Judaic point of view. By Judaic we mean: an approach, necessarily eclectic and not identified with any specific branch of tradition, that suggests itself to a modern Jew on the basis of a long involvement with the full range of the Jewish historical experience.¹

A word of caution. The religious types described in the following section are to some degree universal, i.e. they are not necessarily limited to any one religion, although most often they find their classical expression in one of the "great" religious traditions. Each religion usually comprises within its historical experience a wide range of types, some reflecting inner polarities such as Halakha and Aggada in Judaism; others reflecting outside influences such as Greek philosophy and various forms of Gnosticism on the three monotheistic religions. It is our awareness of the extraordinary richness and spiritual variety which is characteristic of almost all the so-called "higher" religions which prompts us to talk in phenomenological rather than in purely historical terms in the following section.

What is presented here are idealized types which find their most radical crystallization in an important branch of a given religion at a particular period of its development. The historical problem of unity within religions, which presents us with such a conflicting richness of experience, will be discussed elsewhere. In the meantime, suffice it to say that each religion, when studied from the inside in all its historical complexity, may appear to the outsider as many religions. Quite often, it is only when a

particular religion, with all its complexities and contradictions is studied from the vantage point of an alien religion, that its distinctive characteristics emerge more clearly and definitively.

With these observations in mind, let us begin by briefly summarizing some of the ways men have devised for conceiving and coping with the relationship of the spirit and the world of imperfection.

I. The Spirit And The Physical World

a. Humanism, Ancient And Modern

This viewpoint takes an essentially optimistic attitude towards existence: the world is basically a good place to live in; order, not chaos, prevails; goodwill exceeds malice. Most of the evils of the world are the products of man's folly or self indulgence. Most evils, therefore, can be eliminated by the use of common sense, and by the application of science to the problems of human existence. Education and rationality are the hallmarks of this approach, and man is considered, rightly or wrongly, a highly educable creature.

This attitude is most attractive to many Jews. Certainly, our tradition has never deprecated the application of common sense to human problems, the activation of the rational faculties of man, or the importance of education. Nor has Judaism, at least in its biblical manifestation,² considered the world to be an essentially bad place to live in: at least, as it emerged from the hands of the Creator, it was "very good" indeed.

These obvious virtues of the humanist view should not blind us to its faults—its failure to take into account much of the intractable evil of this world—especially the evil that is not the immediate consequence of man's error and ignorance. It gives little or no attention to death, or to the impotence of our intelligence to give meaning to much of life, or to the perversity of men, who, though sensitive in the arts and learned in the

sciences, are nevertheless failures as human beings. The slogan: "more rationality" simply does not answer these phenomena. And above all, the inexplicable nature of existence—if you will, its mysterious quality—is evaded. One does not have to be Freudian to realize that evasion is the result of fear: All of us fear death, fear the unknown; some face fear and the unknown with resignation; others simply deny their existence.

b. The Spiritual Radical: Reality Is Not Real

Polar to the humanists there are those who are intensely aware of the imperfection of existence. For them, the very act of living is a kind of mistake: It is shot through and through with pain, with the ache of fulfilled desire and the frustration of unfulfilled desire, by the transience of life and the meaningless repetitiousness of existence—and above all, by the fallibility of our senses. In fact, all unredeemed men—that is most of mankind—must suffer the material world and their material, sensible bodies as they would a disease. The enlightened believe that the world of birth and death is but a deception of the senses, a mask which has to be shed to secure for man a life of blessedness. We suffer evil only because we believe in the reality of our individual and differentiated personalities. As discrete human entities, we suffer the anxieties of desire, of jealousy and pain. However, once we overcome the misleading differentiation of persons, of the I and the Thou, and attempt to become one with Being itself, we experience the blessedness of non-Being—a state of existence free from evil and immune from pain—and devoid of choice, volition and responsibility.

In this system, evil is so deeply experienced, that for life to go on, reality itself has to be redefined. One can reject this attitude for its lack of realism, yet one can only be moved by the human ache which motivates it, by its inner calm, and by its attempt to conquer the pain of existence through the application of mind—however unreal this application may seem. For the Jew,

however, such a system, in its radical denial of reality, is the antithesis of biblical faith.

c. The Spiritual Rebel: Existence Is Evil But Real; The Spirit Is Real But Hidden

Like the spiritual radical, there are others who are acutely aware of the problem of existence, but refuse to deny its reality. Evil is real in all its concrete immediacy. It is so real that it cannot be dismissed quietly as a disease of perception to be cured by self-enlightenment. This world in all its fleshy reality, with all its inner rules and limitations, with all its imperfection, is so totally perverse, so much the quintessence of all evil that only a demon or a maniac bent on causing unending suffering for mankind could have conceived the grotesque plan of creating a world so totally devoid of true spirituality, of holiness and good. A demon—often identified with the biblical creator—is the true creator of this world. The god of true spirituality has nothing to do with the world of flesh, form and reality; he is in hiding and only faint rays of his presence are occasionally felt by the illuminated.

In place of intellectual calm and repose, historically identified with some sort of Buddhism, this system—usually called Gnosticism—is possessed by an almost Promethean anger, a profound resentment against the cosmic status-quo. At times, one is tempted to admit that its description of reality fits the facts better than any other system. It is this seeming correctness which has engendered the Gnostic attitude in all sorts of places and periods: in Persia, in medieval France, and in the very heart of Judaism.

However, if the Gnostic analysis of reality seems correct, one can only shudder at its solution. Since chaotic reality is real and not a delusion, it cannot be read away by the mind: It must be shattered by an eruption of equally chaotic spirituality. If there is a god—and the Gnostics believe that there is—he must be hiding

in the realm of pure spirit, unfettered by the limits of time and space, and the limitations of law and existence. Man wants to become one with the spirit. Anything connected with reality fetters man's spirit: law, structure, distinctions of good and evil, rationality, measure, the self as it presently exists—all of these must go; all of them are the prison of the spirit that must be shattered to free the soul to return to its source. Only nihilistic and antinomian acts of rebellion against the inherent laws of reality can break open the prison. The realities of matter and the flesh are killed by the Gnostic in two ways: (a) by an extreme asceticism which kills the self by mortification; (b) an extreme orgiastic license: fight fire by fire; feed the devil with his own evil till his belly bursts.³

While the Buddhist solves the problem of reality by thinking it and himself out of existence, the Gnostic solves the problem by destroying reality and himself by acts of spiritual violence.

d. Reality Is Tainted But Grace Intervenes

Buddhism and Gnosticism face the evil of existence and, each in its own uncompromising way, attempts to abandon existence. There were others, mostly Christians, who were unable to accept the simple and terminal solution of a demon-created world and a spirit unsullied. They faced the horrible paradox of a good God who created the world in His goodness and a man corrupt and, by himself, incapable of redemption. It is as if Judaism and Gnosticism fight over the soul of Christianity. Like Gnosticism, Christianity is acutely aware of the pain that pervades the world and the weak and sinful nature that pervades man's will. The Jewish elements in Christianity prevented the latter from adopting the dualistic solution of the paradox of a benign god hidden in his absolute transcendence and an evil creator of the world—none other than the God of the Hebrew Bible. But Christianity is so aware of the pain of the world, the sinful heart of man and even the good deeds stemming from that heart, that

the denial of the existence of Satan, the Evil One, is tantamount to denying the existence of God. Even though a good God created the world, the world cannot be that good if one has to die unto the world to be reborn in the crucified God. Hope and salvation are in a world beyond this world. If it were not for the freely-given, underserved condescension of a God who came into this world incarnate to save man from his condition, all would be lost. It is not man's love for God that counts but His love for man.⁴

Paradoxically, the Jew who suffered pain and death and expulsion more than any Christian, finds it difficult to understand the Christian's preoccupation with sin and salvation, death, all the existential evils of the world, man's basic depravity, and especially the worthlessness of man's deeds to redeem himself. Although Jews and Christians share the idea of the divine initiative in the God-human situation (i.e. it is God who turns toward man, not man to God), Jews and Christians part company when it comes to the reasons for this initiative. For Christians, God condescends to save man from his worthlessness. One can almost say with Marcion: The more worthless the recipient of the divine grace, the more loving the divine donor.

For the Jews, God enters the world to form a contractual relationship with man—one could almost say a partnership: "I hereby give you My law-book, filled with My commandments. I in My love will give you the necessary intelligence to study the book and translate My commandments into an earthly reality." The rabbis who were no mean students of the Bible, knew of man's sinfulness, but they also knew that they were sons of the King and partners with Him in creating a moral world through the instrumentality of the Law. In one religion, God comes down to save: The greater the depravity of the sinner, the greater the power and arbitrariness of His love. In the other religion, He comes down as a law-giver and a teacher. His greatest joy is independent students who so master inner-workings of the Law, that on occasion they can actually master the teacher at His own game. (Cf. Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 119.)

In spite of the Jews' reservations about Christianity's anti-worldliness, its seeming obsession with sin and salvation, its lack of emphasis on man's creative partnership with God, or the absence of the mind-expanding joy in the study of the Torah—nevertheless, no sensitive person can deny the nobility and bravery of the Christian who is able to live with two true but conflicting realities: the goodness of God and the evil of the world. Many may be outraged at the central moment of Christianity: the drama of the crucified God. But even the outraged can only marvel at the great religious power released by this drama, and by the unique catharsis of all the raw experiences of existence—birth, pain and death—effected, and thus somewhat relieved, by the celebration of this awful and awesome drama.

Empirically speaking, the simple fact that some people do actually survive the evils of this world and miraculously preserve their humanity can only be explained as the gift of divine grace, bestowed by a God, incarnate or not. The Jew may not like the term "grace," but no other word describes the fact more correctly.

II. Some Philosophical Reflections

Before we approach the heart of our investigation—a Judaic approach to the conflict between the spirit and the world—a more precise definition of these polar terms is in order. This is especially true of the term "spirit" which, in the preceding section, has often been used as a virtual synonym for the terms "soul," "the holy," and even for "God."

It is assumed here that man is more than his body; that he has an objective psychic life. Furthermore, that his psychic life is at least as structured as his physical life; that one area of this life of the psyche is what traditional religion calls the soul. The term is not used here in the manner of psychologists, religionists, or philosophers, but in the common-sense fashion often employed by writers and artists. We all know what is meant by the

expression "he has soul." It is an objective personality trait; a certain kind of sensitivity, an openness to people and things, an awareness of certain dimensions of life—especially of the holy and the spiritual. As if it were possible to hypostatize this quality of soul and to give it special reality, we talk about "*the soul*." Metaphorically speaking, it is one organ of the psychic mechanism. It is an organ attuned to several dimensions of reality—the holy and the spiritual: attuned to, and, in need of. Thus defined, the soul is the subject of the religious life.

The spirit is that creative potential in man—and according to some, in nature as well—that makes for self-transcendence. It is the process which makes creations more than the sum of their parts, symphonies more than the totality of their notes, which allows us to say that it is the mind and its categories that "creates" reality, not vice versa. Because of the workings of the spirit, sound becomes language, individuals create and participate in collective patterns of culture, ideas are born and find expression in the symbolic forms of art, religion and philosophy. The spirit is a power which is in itself transcendent (it seems not to be derived from any prior category of existence) and which makes for self-transcendence in man. When we say that the creation is sometimes greater than the creator, or, that the creator through the creative act becomes more than he was, creates himself anew—we are confronted with a manifestation of the spirit, i.e., of self-transcendence. One does not have to posit the divine origins of the spirit—or its virtual identification with God—to feel the efficacy of the spirit in the experiential world. Most people sensitized to creativity would affirm the spirit as a concrete datum of our psychic life, as a constitutive element of the human reality. Many sense its inexplicability in scientific categories, and may even be in awe of its mysterious quality. Some even experience the psychological dimension of the spirit so intensely that they are willing to posit its ontological transcendence as well. For many such people, God and the Spirit are virtually identical.

The holy, unlike the soul, is not the subject of the religious.

Nor is it, like the spirit, that power of soul which expresses self-transcendence in creative acts. The holy is an oblique way of talking about God. To say that things are holy is tantamount to saying that somehow God is in them. For some, this means that divinity and the substance of the object are one: Divinity is imminent in nature; holiness is physical-magical. For others, God's holiness is not to be seen as the eternal nature of certain things (e.g. it is the nature of fire to burn and water to be wet). Rather, it is God's sovereign power and will which invests neutral matter with its holiness and significance. Thus, for the Jew, the land and people of Israel are not holy from the beginning, but only become so at a moment in history, when God, by an act of selection, touched them with His presence, endowing them with the aura of His personhood.

Now if the holy is virtually synonymous with God, why do so many prefer to talk about the experience of the holy, rather than directly affirming the experience of God or the belief in Him? For many, especially those with a sense of delicacy in such matters, the use of the more oblique term preserves the privacy of the experience: One does not talk about God—or love—publicly or too directly. For others, the use of the term "holy" rather than God resolves a serious philosophical problem. While their empiricism prevents them from talking about the ontological reality of God, their experience of certain things and situations is so profoundly "religious," that a word is needed to express the intensity of this reality, a word which will adequately reflect the tension between their feelings and their thoughts. For them, to talk about the experience of the holy rather than about the knowledge of God is such a resolution.

But just how is the holy experienced? For many, the holy is experienced as a quality inherent in certain manifestations of the spirit. At first, the reaction to the holy may be one of attraction, of aesthetic appreciation. Gradually, however, this feeling may turn into one of awe. But it is more than awe; it has a moral-personal dimension as well. The holy is associated with

that elusive x-factor—intensely experienced but almost incapable of definition—which somehow redeems life from its radical emptiness, and, paradoxically, makes it worth dying for. The holy has something ultimate about it: ultimate in the ecstasy one feels when confronted with it; ultimate in the urgency and demand it places on us. The holy is inviolate and is somehow associated with the self (or the soul). Therefore, he who defiles the holy, kills a part of the self. Conversely, he who has a soul, knows on some level, the immediacy and *ananke* of the holy.

Thus, loosely speaking, the soul is that sector of the psychic life which senses in certain manifestations of the spirit the quality of holiness. The soul, the spirit, and the holy are considered—rightly or wrongly—as actual categories of man's psychological being. For some, the affirmation that such experienceable categories do exist is sufficient. Others, however, seem to need some ontological or metaphysical underpinning for these categories, which they seek in God, the locus—or even creator—of the soul, the spirit, and the holy. Others, sceptical of such non-verifiable entities, would consider the word "God" as the spirit's noble attempt to explain to itself the source of its own transcendence. It is an attempt to describe a reality in which soul, the spirit and the holy are one. Even though this attempt is doomed to failure, it does point out that the workings of the spirit are forever a mystery, even to itself, and that the God who is more than model or metaphor is somehow a part of that very mystery.

The descriptions of various reactions of the human spirit to the problem of the world and worldliness presented in the first section serve several functions. First of all, they provide a dramatic foil which helps us to highlight what is essential in a Judaic reaction to the world. Secondly, we are confronted by the fact that each of these reactions has its own virtues and limitations. None succeeds entirely, yet each sees a truth not seen by the other.

However, the humbling realization that any attempt to make complete sense of the world is as difficult as attempting to square

the circle should not lead us to avoid completely the act of theologizing or to escape into valuationally neutral areas such as abstract mathematics, where the truth of the proposition is its beauty or, to more objective fields where facticity is at least an approachable goal.

Whether we like it or not, all of us philosophize (i.e. try to make some sense of the world): it seems to be our nature to do so. Those who say they don't, do so unconsciously—and more often than not, badly. However, those who consciously philosophize, should arm themselves with the fore-knowledge that they are engaged in a noble, but ultimately tragic activity—one in which they cannot win, but also one which they cannot cease therefrom.

Only God knows all. To make peace with the paradox of a God who gave us enough mind to ask ultimate questions, but not enough mind to answer them, is to be truly wise and truly human. In the following section we will describe one attempt of Judaism to make sense of and to resolve these paradoxes.

III. Biblical Realism

Most historical confrontations between the spirit and the physical world—with the notable exception of Humanism, ancient and modern—have seen the world as the enemy of the spirit. Few men have had the calm of the classical Greek religionist for whom the world was *kosmos*, "eternal order," reflected in the divine heavenly bodies moving in their time-honored paths according to their eternal and imminent laws. Many men were inclined to see the world as a temporary order imposed upon an intractable chaos which threatened to break forth at any moment (so ancient Mesopotamian man). Others went even further. The world—with all of its order, temporary or eternal—is a physical impediment to the achievement of spiritual liberation or religious perfection. It is a burden to be sloughed off, a contamination to be avoided, a deception of the senses to be cured, a plight requiring redemption. This attitude is especially

true of the radical and rebel spiritualist—especially the Gnostic—for whom the law is in many ways the very symbol of unredeemed reality: It is the law of that nature, both physical and psychological, which he refuses to accept. Therefore, by Gnosis, law could be either transcended or broken. For the Christian—at least in some early formulations and in Luther—the law is the embarrassing reminder of man's basic sinfulness and of his impotence to overcome it. Law, therefore, had to be replaced by Grace initiated not by man but from above.

The World As Necessary Ground Of Action

Judaism—at least in some of its biblical and rabbinic manifestations—orients itself in a different manner. Instead of resenting the world, it accepts it as the creation of a beneficent God. For the radical spiritualist, such an idea is inconceivable, even impious. How could the spirit willfully contaminate itself by direct contact with the physical world? How could it build into the world the very laws of reality which inhibit man's spiritual quest? For God to seek some sort of fulfillment in the world, to use it as the stage for the workings of the spirit, seems to the radical spiritualist the very antithesis of true faith. Yet this is what much of the Jewish tradition seems to be saying.

Let us clarify this point by an analogy. A gifted dramatist has finally put himself down on paper. His play—the essence of his dreams and efforts—lies inertly on his desk. The dramatist, unfortunately, is held captive in the blueprint of his play until live actors realize his intentions on an actual stage. If he were a painter or a sculptor, his own creative efforts would be sufficient. However, as a dramatist or composer he needs the participation of performers to translate the score into reality. The performers however are also faced with their own problem: how to remain true to their own feelings without being disloyal to the dramatist's intentions. If they simply read their lines without projecting their own feelings, they kill the spirit of the play—if they make up new

lines, they subvert its inner form. Everything depends on their balance and delicacy, empathy and control.

The realities symbolized by this analogy are clear. The Torah is God's play—the blueprint of a moral world waiting to be realized. The physical world with its water and dry land, and its necessary imperfection, is the stage on which the drama will unfold. This world—existence, reality, matter—is, in a poetic sense, a divine necessity. It is the raw material in which the creative urge is satisfied and finds form. To deny the world is to deny the God who created it.

The radical spiritualist is appalled by this drama because it affirms and glorifies all that he most fears and hates. It implies that God, although free from the physical limitations of time and space, magic and coercion, nevertheless acts as if motivated by a spiritual "need": the need to realize a moral order. It implies that He who is most free from the limitations of the world, is nevertheless limited in his "dependence" on a human partner, the actual builder of the moral world.

There are dangers in this situation. For man to be a partner, he must be free. But freedom without the potential of rebellion and sin is no freedom at all. Yet rebellion destroys creation and the possibility of partnership. However, the inner dialectic of God's plan requires a free human being, armed with intelligence and the potential of rebellion. An automaton devoid of impulses, a being like the angels, would lack the capacity to create. Unfortunately, it is this very creative factor that often subverts the plan.

According to the Talmud, God was well aware of this difficulty: He was torn between His desire to realize the Torah and His knowledge that a man armed with freedom could create chaos and destroy the world. But in an act of divine "bravery" He created man.

This often tragic tension in the divine mind—between realism and love—is beautifully reflected in the following midrash.⁵ When God was about to create the world, He said to his angelic council: "Shall we create man in our image?" A group of angels

stepped forward and offered this advice: "Lord of the Universe! Consider man's potential for evil: he will lie, murder, commit adultery, and create weapons to destroy your world. Don't go through with the plan." However, the divine urge to create a human partner was so great that no argument, however realistic, was tolerated. The Lord stretched forth His little finger, let loose a surge of energy, and burned the angels—the heavenly realists—to a crisp. Other groups made similar suggestions and were treated in a similar fashion, until the angels acquiesced to the divine desire and gave their approval saying: "Lord, the world is yours. Do with it as you see fit."

The predictions of the angels came true in full measure. One does not have to record all of the mishaps that followed the divine declaration: "Behold it is very good." Adam was given one commandment and broke it. Eve was tempted by the serpent. Cain murdered his brother, and his not-so-distant relative made weapons of iron to kill more men. The angels became overly interested in the daughters of men—all of which, together with the general corruption of man, brought on the flood. But even after this chastisement, the man "who was just in his generation" had nothing better to do after escaping the wrath of the waters than to drown himself in wine. And then came the Tower of Babel . . . after which, according to the midrash, the angels came before the Lord and said in a tone of not-so-gentle admonition: "The first group of angels were not so wrong after all."

The rabbis of the midrash realized that without human freedom and all that it implies—instinctual urges and the capacity to destroy as well as to create⁶—the law would be irrelevant. When the angels suggested that the Torah be given to them, instead of to man, God replied: "Do you lie, do you steal, do you have an evil *yeşer*?" Without man, the law is irrelevant; without freedom and instinct man is not human.

It is related⁷ that after the Men of the Great Assembly had abolished the *yeşer hara* of idolatry, they decided to get rid of its

partner, the overall *yeşer*: the source of all instinct. They offered a petition to the divine court and their request was granted. The *yeşer* was incarcerated; no longer would it stimulate the world. However, three days went by when someone went out to look for a fresh egg to cure a sick person—lo and behold!—there were no fresh eggs to be found. The generative processes had come to a full stop. Because of the inactivity of the *yeşer*, the chickens were not laying eggs and the work of creation began to disintegrate. The Men of the Great Assembly were faced with a grave problem: To let the *yeşer* loose was to court danger; to fetter it completely, was to destroy the world. They came to the following solution: Let it loose but put a pair of blinders on its eyes; regulate its excitations but do not get rid of them. The *yeşer* is the yeast of creation. It makes the bread rise and stimulates man to struggle with his fellow man, thereby creating a society of people engaged in what was known as *yishuvo shel olam*. Like some vital nutriment before adequate preparation⁸ the *yeşer hara* in its raw state is dangerous and destructive. However, when processed by the Torah and sublimated by the rationality of the law, it becomes a vital and indispensable element in human life—the very impetus of the world of creation. As energy in the raw, it destroys; structured and channelled it creates a new world.

Law is not merely God's dream, the plan of a new world, but also the instrument which humanifies man sufficiently to participate in the fulfillment of this drama. Man is created in the divine image; but as image, it is an unrealized potential. Only by becoming human under the guidance of the law, does man actualize this potential.

The Law, Death and Knowledge. Law is by essence a limit and a boundary. Our biological being is subject to the law of death; our intellectual grasp is limited by the law of the senses. Religions of radical spirituality rebel against these limits and in their hubris, create intellectual Towers of Babel to storm the heights of the spirit: By Gnosis, knowledge, enlightenment, man can transcend his biological finiteness, become one with infinite

and eternal spirit and achieve immortality, in short, to become like the gods.

Judaism is not a religion of radical spirituality but one of law and limit. God created the world with these limitations; since He knew what He was doing, man must humbly accept them and make peace with them. For man to believe that through knowledge he can transcend the limit of death and become eternal is to deny that God is truly the Lord. The midrash states this insight with typical poetic breadth. "God anticipated that Nebuchadnezzar and Hiram king of Tyre would someday, in their hubris, declare that they were divine. Therefore, as a preventative measure, He decreed death for Adam and for all mankind."⁹ Death, according to monotheism, is the inbuilt protection against man's latent tendencies to proclaim his own divinity.

In cultures where man thought he could become like a god and live forever, knowledge—either in the form of a secret or a philosophical discipline—was often considered as the key to eternal life: Gilgamesh comes to Utnapishtim¹⁰ and men joined mystery religions—all in search of knowledge which made men like gods, immortal. However, in Israel, where the gap between man and God was absolute, nothing—not even knowledge—could bring about such a transformation. As long as biblical man accepts the authority of God, he is forced to make peace with his mortality and use his mind, not for the purpose of becoming like God, but simply to listen to His commands to live justly in an imperfect world.

The Humanity of God. The ultimate principles of most religions are the stumbling blocks of their believers. This is especially true of the faiths of radical spirituality. A God who is presented as absolute perfection, spirituality, non-involvement, self-sufficiency, omniscience, etc. is not a viable model for human behavior. Yet all religions set as the ultimate goal of their faith the imitation of the divine. Such a model is a stumbling-block for two segments of the population. The spiritual aristocrats will say

in their arrogance, "If the divine is perfect, all-knowing, and above the fetters and limitations of reality, I will attain the same attributes; I too can achieve liberation from reality." These holy spirits, however, usually collapse in their attempt to transcend their creatureliness, the limits of reality inherent in their bodies and souls. The rest of humanity will find such an ideal totally unrealistic and will not even attempt an approximation. In fact, the radical perfection of the image may only discourage them and lead them into greater inhumanity.

The rabbis in their wisdom tell us all of the sins of the saints; in this they follow the Bible. They even add sins that the Bible does not tell us about. All of this is done with the intuitive genius of the master pedagogue. An educational model has to be capable of imitation; one cannot imitate perfection since there is little personal empathy between the sinner and the saint.

However, if David, the great and noble king, sinned and yet was able to repent, every man is already capable of empathy. David is human yet humane and this is why he can serve as a model. This principle can be extended mythically—that is seriously but not literally—to the divine. God in His infinite wisdom knew that if He revealed His true—i.e., transcendent—nature to man He would cause great human havoc. Therefore, He donned a human persona: He appeared before man as a human personality; fallible, human yet noble, warm and humane. He created a world, entered into a contractual relationship with man; became involved in the human condition, experienced exasperation over the hardness of their hearts, regretted that He had ever created man; was moved by the intercession of Moses and other prophets; broke out into fits of rage over the sinfulness of His people; was so involved in Israel, that in spite of their sinfulness, He actually re-espoused them after having delivered them the bill of divorcement. God appears in the garb of all the human emotions: love, anger, involvement, indignation, regret, sadness, etc. By so doing, God has given the seal of divinity to the very essence of our humanity. He implicitly says to man:

"You cannot know what is above and what is below, but you can know what is in your hearts and in the world. These feelings and reactions and emotions which make up human existence, if illumined by faith and rationality, are all the divinity you can hope for. To be humane is to be divine: As I am holy, so you shall be holy; as I am merciful so you shall be merciful." Thus, there is only one kind of knowledge that is open to man—the knowledge of God's humanity:

Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom,
Nor let the strong man boast of his strength,
Nor the rich man boast of his riches!
Rather it is in this that a man should take pride:
That he knows and attends Me
That I, the Lord, am He who practices kindness,
Justice, and righteousness on Earth;
For in these things I delight." (Jer. 9, 22–23)

Neither the secrets of the universe nor the Gnosis that transcends death, but obedience to those human attributes in which the Lord, in His divine wisdom, clothes Himself to serve as the model of human behavior. This is the deeper meaning of the statement that the Torah speaks in human language.

The purpose of much of the rabbinic Aggadah is to humanize the image of God, and by doing so, to humanize men created in this image. I end this section with a Midrash.¹²

How does God spend his time? During the first third of the day, as divine judge and cosmic administrator He recites this prayer: "May it be My will that My love for humanity will overcome My exasperation with them!" During the second third of the day, He takes out the Torah and studies. And during the third part of the day, He is the cosmic *shadchan* who brings man and wife together.¹³

Here is the quintessence of humanity and spiritual realism. It is as if to say that God has an inner life of prayer, an intellectual life of study, and a life of loving social responsibility; these are the

really divine traits. He is the powerful administrator of the world. As an administrator, He faces all the problems that the human power-holder faces. If He did not love humanity, He would have never created men; nevertheless, they are exasperating. He prays that He has the strength to stand this inner tension. He also is constantly studying, and if you should say, "I know it all," consider the Lord and see that even He, at least poetically speaking, does not know it all: therefore, study!

And yet, it must always be borne in mind that all these statements, with all their power and beauty, are not to be taken literally: God is still more than man, and the midrash is still Aggada.

NOTES

1. Thus, for example nomistic Judaism, had room not merely for what Kadushin has called "normal mysticism," but for all sorts of real mystical phenomena: from the vision of the divine body and the hearing of the angelic chorus, to the Gnosticism of Lurianic Kabbalah and its antinomian transmutation in Sabbatarianism; from the positive attitude toward sexuality found in many rabbinic statements, to an attitude of absolute morbidity in many medieval pietistic works and, believe it or not, right in the heart of seemingly "healthy" Hassidism (cf. Heschel's study of the Kotzker Rebbi); from an aristocratic piety based on the centrality of learning, to a seemingly more popular piety based on the adoration of the charismatic leader and his theurgic powers.

2. While Judaism, unlike Gnosticism, does not see the *world* as evil, at least one of the biblical sources (Genesis 8:21) does see *man* as such. The realistic optimism that has been presented above, is but one strand in biblical thinking. Clearly, Jeremiah's vision of the new heart (Jer. 31:31ff.) represents a divine loss-of-nerve vis-a-vis man's educability. God no longer believes that man can be taught to be good under the guidance of the Torah. Yet, in spite of the divine exasperation with the old educational dispensation based on the belief that man can independently assimilate the message being taught, God keeps on trying new methods. If older methods based on freedom do not work, a kind of "Skinnerian programming" is contemplated: God will write the Torah—not on books—but directly on the heart. So programmed, the "pretaped heart" should automatically lead man to an instinctive performance of the commandments, and thus lead him to the ultimate felicity where men shall not have to teach each other the word of the Lord, but shall perform it instinctively.

To cite a modern example, it was Heschel himself, whose whole corpus of writing breathed a positive, optimistic, almost humanistic spirit, who spent the last year of his life investigating the life and teachings of the Kotzker Rebbi—a morbid, relentlessly honest investigator of man's sinfulness, and a passionate hater of the world and wordliness. One of the first lectures Heschel gave upon arriving in America was his Yiddish "Kotzk and Kierkegaard" which finally took shape in English as *A Passion for Truth* (N.Y., Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1973).

A friend of mine, upon leaving a famous East European yeshiva, was given the following parting blessing by his former teacher: "Sir—I know from now on you will not be a good Jew; I also know that having been with us, you will never fully enjoy the fleshly pleasures of the world."

3. Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, and H. Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*.

4. For better or for worse, much of my understanding of Christianity has been influenced by Kierkegaard, and especially by Nygren's *Eros and Agape*. My presentation may thus not do justice to more Catholic positions, which, in their stressing of Natural Law, may be less extreme and relatively more viable. Furthermore, contemporary Christianity's understandable, but violent repudiation of its traditional resentment against the world and worldliness, is hardly reflected in the above statement. The author may more correctly reflect the tradition against which many modernists are reacting, rather than Christianity as it is actually lived with its new appreciation of the world of the senses and its new concern with the world of communal responsibility.

5. Freely adopted after the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 38. While the ontological reality of angels in rabbinic literature cannot be totally denied, more often than not, angels often seem to be used as nothing more than literary devices—as dramatic projections of one of two opposing moods in the conflicted divine mind. Thus, in our midrash, God "plays out" divine love, and the angels externalize the opposing mood of God—divine anger or realism. Furthermore, the rather abstract value concepts of *din* and *rahamim* find a more dramatic—and pedagogically more effective—expression and concretization.

6. Cf. Genesis Rabba, 9:7. This and all following citations from the midrashic literature are free renditions rather than literal translations.

7. Cf., Babylonian Talmud, Yoma, 60 b. For more literature, cf. E.E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem, 1969) p. 418, note 9. (in Hebrew).

8. Midrash Tanhuma, Genesis, 7 and following.

9. Genesis Rabba 9:5. For more details, cf. Urbach, *The Sages*, op. cit., p. 378.

10. Cf. Speiser's translation of the Gilgamesh Epic, in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 2nd Ed., p. 72 ff.

11. Cf. I. Heinemann, *The Methods of the Aggadah* (Jerusalem, 1949) pp. 49ff. (in Hebrew).

12. The author will be forgiven the poetic license of fusing elements derived from different midrashim all dealing with the same theme: the divine work-day after the first six days of creation. The themes of divine study and judging/administrating are found in the Babylonian Talmud, Abodah Zarah 3b.

13. The theme of the divine match-maker is found in Genesis Rabba 68:4 and in many other places.