

The Beckoning God

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"As the deer panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, Oh God." So the Psalmist speaks of the Jew's search for God. There is much talk today of the problem of defining just what a Jew is. I would say, at the very least, a person is less a Jew to the extent that he does not participate in the *search* for God. Please note that I did not use the word "belief." One can be a doubter and not be less a Jew, but *one can never surrender the search for God and remain a Jew*, in the historic meaning of that name. "As the deer panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, Oh God." *A Jew is one who seeks God*; nay, he is one who *demands* that there be God, for, otherwise, our world is just an orb spinning to its destruction without plan or meaning.

A Jew can challenge God and argue with Him, as Job does in the biblical book that bears his name. A Jew can tell God He is wrong and try to restrain Him, as Abraham does in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. A Jew can be an agnostic, as Menasha Skulnick was in a popular Broadway play, but a Jew is not a Jew, in the real sense, unless he continues to search for God. "Where can I find Thee?", cries the Psalmist. "Where can I find Thee?", cries the Jewish poet. In response to this question put by Jews in all ages, a Hasidic Rabbi tells this story: "A disciple asked his teacher, 'Rabbi, how is it that sometimes we cannot see that God exists?'. The teacher replied, 'The sun shines at all times, filling the earth with its splendor, but we can shut it all out with one small hand.' " God is everywhere, the story suggests, but it is so easy to shut Him out, so easy to be unaware of His pervasive presence.

Primitive man had little trouble identifying with the divine Spirit. Was there not a Spirit in each tree that caused it to grow? Was there not a Spirit in each star that caused it to glow? For earliest man, the world was teeming with Spirits, great and small, known and unknown, mysterious, and, sometimes, frightening.

The first great civilizations attempted to systemize man's religious search. Ancient Egyptian religious leaders thought of the gods as super-magicians working miracles whenever they so fancied. The Egyptian priests operated on the premise that if they could assemble the secrets of magic, they could compel the gods to act as they wished. The religious texts of ancient Egypt are a study in voodoo. There is no record there of a prophet like Isaiah proclaiming the way to international peace, but there are detailed instructions on how to survive after death by pre-arranged magic. Look closely at the Pyramids, when you are able to go there, and you will see that they are merely houses for the dead, with magical drawings and symbols all around.

Small wonder, then, that when Moses and Aaron sought to convince Pharaoh that their God wanted them to leave Egypt, the two men had to present themselves as super-magicians, able to outduel the high priests of Egypt. The drama of the plagues can only be understood in the light of Egyptian religion. Other remnants of magical belief can, indeed, be found in our Bible, but it is obvious that the hints at magic are not part of the dominant thrust of biblical teaching.

Magic-oriented religions generally assume that we can not know what the gods are going to do or when they are going to do it. These religions are based on the belief that the gods are willful and capricious. The great Babylonian religious texts are somewhat different in this regard. Their magic is tied to a body of knowledge concerning the movement of the heavenly bodies. It was the Babylonians who invented astrology, and modern-day astrology is but little changed from the Babylonian creation. The Babylonian priests believed that if a certain planet was in a particular position with relation to the moon or another star, then, this meant the gods would act in a certain way. If the planet was in a different position than anticipated, this meant the gods would act differently. With deep devotion, the Babylonian priests searched for the divine message spelled out there in the evening sky. Was the message favorable or unfavorable to the petitioner? Was the divine answer "tabu" or "limnu," good or bad? The Jews were brought as captives to the land of Babylonia in the sixth century B.C.E. They could hardly escape some influences of the astrological cult. A remnant of this influence is found in our Hebrew phrase "mazel tov," which we translate to mean "congratulations" or "good luck." The root of these two originally Babylonian words is "mazel"—constellation, "tov"—favorable. "Mazel tov" is an astrological term meaning "a favorable sign."

The Hebrew prophets, however, would have none of this pseudo-science, this magic clothed in scientific garb. Isaiah attacks the astrologers along with the sorcerers and enchanters who try to deceive the people into believing that God's decisions are to be interpreted on the basis of such things as shifts in the wind or movement of birds in flight. It was the Israelites who insisted that there were not many wills in the world, but one, and that Will was above all, constant, consistent, tied to the very moral law which it wished men to follow.

More than a thousand years after Abraham and five hundred years after Moses, the Greeks also broke free of the realm of magic and created a high form of religious philosophy. Plato spoke of ideal patterns of Good, Truth, and Justice that existed in the world, but the average person in Greece could get no comfort from Plato's ideal "Good." Plato said that "The Good" had no personality or feeling. It could not

be addressed as an object of prayer. It knew no compassion. It was not capable of forgiveness. It was something that only those who specialized in mathematics and philosophy could ever come to know.

The Feeling God

While the Hebraism of Moses has a profound philosophical base, the God of Moses is not just a philosopher's ideal. He is very much *alive*. He is a God of intense *feeling* and *action*. Every Jew should recite to himself over and over the story of Moses and his encounter with God in the desert. Engaged in the mundane activity of sheep-herding, Moses, we are told, saw a bush aflame, a miraculous bush which burned but was not consumed. Then Moses seemed to hear a voice which exclaimed, "I hear the cry of My people who are enslaved . . . I know their pain . . . go help them in My name." This was a God who was not beyond descending from His Olympian heights to deal with man at his level of basic need. Seven hundred years before Plato and the flower of Greek genius, Moses centered his search for God around the question, "Do the *slaves* have someone who cares for them?" "Who cares about the poor man?" asked Moses. "Does God have something to say about kindness and compassion?" The uniqueness of the Jewish search for God is that it went in a direction no other people had ever gone before, and no other people has since spelled out the concept of a God who cares in such all-encompassing detail. The message that Jesus presents in this regard is the message of his Jewish tradition.

It is a tragic aspect of some modern Jewish homes that the parents have relinquished *the search for God*. Having cast off the old wives' tales of their grandmothers, they have concluded, "If my grandparent's God does not exist, there is no God at all." A Jew can be a "sometimes" atheist. He cannot be a confirmed atheist and surrender the search for a higher concept of God. The Jew who abandons the search for planning and meaning in the universe surrenders to the pagans. He abandons the religious battlefield to the magicians and astrologers, to those who are obsessed with man's sinfulness and who are tired of the battle for human dignity.

Let us make certain of one thing; in every age, no matter how sophisticated, the reigning civilization reflects some kind of attitude towards the Divine. Atheism is a kind of religion itself, and to it can be attached all kinds of codes in the name and authority of the God-substitute. Nazi Germany was militantly atheistic. One of its prime targets was the moral God of the Jews, not merely the Jews. Soviet Russia is atheistic. It has substituted the state for the deity. The point is that the ideological vacuum is always filled! If you don't support a humanistically oriented religion like Judaism, you are enabling some other kind of world-view to seize control of the mind of man. The choice is not between religion and no religion. The choice is only, what kind of religion? Who is to be the God-authority? Who are to be His prophets and interpreters; and what kind of attitude towards man, towards man's potential and purposes does the reigning religion have?

Wandering Jewish Children

What happens to the sons and daughters of those Jewish parents who exhibit no spirituality at home? I am in the position to tell you, because I am in contact with college students all the time. Your sons and

daughters, who are spiritually starved by your negativism and indifference, turn to the exotic mystical religions in search of spiritual peace. They turn to Buddhism and to the gurus who abound on every college campus. Now, classical Buddhism is a religion in many respects opposed to Judaism. Judaism teaches that God demands that we come to grips with the evil forces in society, that we control and organize society towards justice and peace. Buddhism teaches that what we call good and evil are illusions and that to grapple with them is a waste of energy. In the inevitable flow of the stream of life, Buddhism teaches, good and evil merge into one; victim and victimized are not distinguishable; fish and fisherman are not distinguishable, for we are all part of each other. There is no higher nor lower, no better or worse. Therefore, all striving is vanity, and the goal is to remove oneself from the world rather than to try to shape it. It was this kind of "godliness" on the part of the Indian leader, Ghandi, that caused him to say that the Jews should not go to Israel to escape Hitler, but, rather, that they should cultivate the *idea* of Israel in their minds and hearts. Those Jews who did nothing more than contemplate escape (by choice or by coercion) died in the gas chambers.

Small wonder that classical Buddhism, which does not address itself to individuals and to their specific problems, has proven too much for the masses in the Orient, and they have converted this ancient religion into something entirely different. Zen Buddhism, for example, tends to come full circle to what amounts almost to a Jewish position and is closely akin to Hasidism. After you have taught your children, by example, that spirituality is of little meaning, try to tell them that they can find the best parts of Zen Buddhism in the Judaism which you have put down or ignored. When you back off from a positive and vigorous presentation of Judaism in your home, you are inviting your children to fill their spiritual needs elsewhere.

It is incorrect to say that the Jewish idea of *the feeling God* was defined once and for all by Abraham and Moses. Quite clearly, the Bible presents a developing idea of God. As the Hebrews became more sophisticated, their understanding of God ripened and matured. Their travel to many lands, often enforced, served to enrich the content of their thought, as they borrowed the best of the cultures they encountered. The culture which was the greatest threat to them, and the one which they resisted the most, was that found in the land of Israel itself, in Canaan. The Canaanites had a fertility cult, since they were an agricultural people. Among the features of their cult was a belief in the value of ritualistic human sacrifice. It seems that the sacrifice of the "first-born son" was especially compelling. The authors of the story of Abraham and the "sacrifice" of Isaac attempted to teach through the story that God does not desire human sacrifice and will settle for a ram (or other animal). The New Testament teaches that God sacrificed His own "first-born son," Jesus, in order that other such human sacrifices would not be necessary. Apparently, the religious value of such sacrifice was still a dominant theme in the Roman world two thousand years ago. The Prophet Micah forcefully declared (eighth century B.C.E.) that God desired neither human nor animal sacrifice, but only that we "do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God."

Present in the Canaanite worship were also elements of the ancient semitic belief in the god who was resurrected. Long before Moses, Babylonians taught that Tammuz, the god of vegetation, died in the Winter and was resurrected at the Spring equinox. In this way did they hope to explain why crops grew at Springtime, but did not grow in

Winter. In Greece, the same myth featured the god, Adonis. In Egypt, the name of the resurrected god was Osiris. In Asia Minor, his name was Attis.* The peoples of the non-Judean world identified very easily with the Christian concept of the resurrected god, because it was a doctrine already assimilated into their cultures. It was a simple matter to change the name of the god, a not unusual occurrence in ancient times (compare Hebrew "Adon-Lord" with Greek "Adonis-Lord").

While Christianity sublimated certain very ancient doctrines, like the sacrifice of the "first born son" and the resurrected God, it contains a large ingredient of Judaism with its ethical orientation and its emphasis on a just and loving God. Christianity is both like and unlike Judaism. For example, Paul, the Jew who was well trained in Greco-Roman thought, took from certain Hellenistic teachers the idea of the conflict between the evil body and the pure Soul. Jewish teachers had emphasized the unity of body and spirit. They both were contained, according to the Hebrew scripture, in one "Nefesh," or essence. Paul, who many scholars hold to be the real architect of Christianity, emphasized man's evil nature and his need to be "saved" from eternal punishment for his sins. The Greek mystery religions had various ways to "salvation" and various "Saviors." For Christians, the Savior became the resurrected God whose blood was shed that others might be saved.**

"Be As I Am"

Now, if Judaism does not teach of God as "Savior," that is as Savior from punishment for our sins (from Hell), what does it teach? *Judaism speaks of God as a Beckoner*, as one who says to Israel and to Man, "Come to Me; follow Me; pattern yourselves after My deeds. Be as I am." Judaism teaches, there is no mysterious or magical salvation. To please God, we must imitate Him in His goodness. The 19th chapter of the Book of Leviticus begins, "Ye shall be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy." The chapter then includes a number of specific ways in which Jews might imitate the actions of God. Every Jew should know this chapter backwards. It includes such teachings as leaving the corners of the field for the poor, removing the stumbling block for the blind, loving your neighbor,† and loving the *stranger*. Judaism can be defined as that religion which teaches that man is made "in the image of God." It teaches that man has the potential and the obligation to grow in God's image, that is, in the image of active Justice, Love, and Mercy.

The Hasidim of the 18th century told this story: "A disciple asked his Master, 'Rabbi, how is it that sometimes God seems to be so far away?' The Rabbi began his answer with a question, 'How does a father teach his child to walk? If the father always held on to the child's hand, the child would always be dependent, and he would never learn to walk. So, the father steps away from the child, faces him, and beckons to him

*Sometimes, as in the case of Adonis, the god was pictured in the totem image of a wild boar or pig. On festival days, the pig was cooked and eaten (sacrificed) by the faithful. Perhaps, this is why the Israelites originally did not eat pork. See further, Fraser's "Golden Bough."

**To learn more about how Christianity developed, see "History of Religions," Vol. II, G.F. Moore, Charles Scribner's Sons, N.Y., 1946; "Ancient Judaism and The New Testament," Frederick C. Grant, Macmillan, N.Y., 1959.

†Clearly, Jesus borrowed much from this chapter, and why not? He was a Jewish teacher.

to come forward.' The Rabbi continued, 'What does the father do when the child takes the first step? He recedes. He moves further away and beckons to the child again to come forward. So God beckons to us and recedes. In this way, does God teach us to become independent. In this way, do we grow towards God.' "

In Judaism, man is not pictured merely as a dreadful sinner who merits Hell without God's grace. On the contrary, our very birth is evidence of God's grace and approval. "Va-yahr ki-tov," reads the Book of Genesis, "and God saw that His creation was good." He said to the man and the woman, "be fruitful and multiply and . . . have dominion over the earth . . ." God trusted us enough to give us control of the earth as His agents! Judaism teaches that God thought man to be equal to this monumental task. It teaches that God had an immense faith in our capacity for good. "Will we be equal to the challenge God gives to us?" is the question Judaism asks of man. For many Christians, following Paul and Luther, the main question is, "Will you be saved from your sins?" In Judaism, the emphasis is, "Will you truly make the world in the image God projected for it?"* It is in trying to shape ourselves and the world that a Jew relates best to God. It is when we manifest an understanding of our cosmic charge and personal responsibility that we most clearly show our belief in God. To act as if human actions were important, to plant and to build with tender loving care, *this* is to go in search of God, for such actions assume that creation is purposeful, that there is a design to be implemented.

To ignore our role as sacred agents, to act as if all human endeavor was a farce, to betray those who love and trust us, to seek only personal pleasure and aggrandizement, this is the life of irreligiosity. It is the ultimate atheism.

Is there God? Is there a sun? You can block out all its brilliance with one small hand. Is there God? Can't you see Him beckoning there, saying, "Come to Me, My daughter, My son, for I have made you in such a way that you can walk in the same path as I do."

Let us not be afraid to walk towards this God. Even if He does not seem to be there when we arrive at the point at which we first saw Him beckoning, be assured that He has only receded to a higher point, to beckon us onward still more. Let us search for the point at which He presently stands. For each of us, He stands at a different position, far away enough to challenge us, yet never so far as not to be near and watchful. Even doubters can walk forward and grow upward until they learn to feel the presence of God. As you take into yourself the qualities we Jews associate with God, as you learn to be compassionate and loving, it becomes easier to feel this Divine Presence.

Blessed is the person who grows to the point where he can say with the Psalmist, "As the deer panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, oh God."

*Where Christians take this message from the "Old Testament," they teach Judaism. Where they emphasize Paul's salvation doctrine, they contradict Judaism.