

## WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SPEAK OF GOD?

Science teaches that we live in a universe which is constantly interacting with itself. It teaches that there are certain basic elements which interact with certain other elements in such a way that growth and decay are taking place incessantly. To understand the physical universe, we are told by the scientists, you must come to understand the basic laws and forces which are constantly at work in the world around us.

Students of the human mind and personality, would have us understand that man is constantly interacting with himself. They teach us that there are certain basic drives and potentialities within men which interact with each other in such a way, that, within the single individual, growth takes place in one area of his being, and decay in another. To understand man, we are told, you must come to understand the basic components of his personality, and the laws which determine his actions and reactions.

In Judaism, we are also concerned with law. While the pagans, and even the Greeks, thought of the gods as those who ruled by whim, the Israelites insisted that the universe was a plan which emanated from specific, divine, decisions, known as Torah. One of the major contributions of the Israelites to the knowledge of the world, is not an isolated fragment which comes into being by virtue of the sudden decision of a fanciful deity. The notion of "history", of a meaningful continuity of events on this earth, is an original Jewish viewpoint. It was the Jew, who taught that life could be reasonably certain for man, if he could ascertain the laws of God, and apply them in the solution of his problems.

Judaism, as reflected by the Psalmist, and the authors of Genesis, is concerned with God's physical laws, but the focus of Judaism, is upon three kinds of law: the law governing the relationship between God and man; the law upon which society is based; and the law governing the relationship between man and man. Each of these three kinds of law, is included in that group of laws that we Jews call Torah. These laws spell out the accumulated wisdom of Jews in understanding how man interacts with God, and with his fellowman. Since the Jews have lived long, and have gleaned the best of many cultures, their Torah reflects not only their own genius, but the contributions of the sages of many times and lands.

God, as Judaism understands him, is the source of the laws operating within man and all around him. With God, is the seat of ultimate decision. From Him, derive the d'varim, the words or commands which set in motion the laws. For Judaism, then, prayer cannot be an effort to have God break the flow of the operating law. Prayer for us is not an appeal for a sudden intervention that will halt the flow of the natural. Prayer, in Judaism, is the attempt of the worshipper, to contact God, i.e., to plumb to the source of law, to attain to the seat of decision. It is an attempt to discover the law that operates, so that in applying it, we may solve our problems. In this sense, prayer is a part of the learning process, and a part of the conduct that follows learning. For us, prayer is not isolated from learning and deed.

When the Jew prays, he does not seek a mystic flash from God. He seeks a present insight which is consistent with all that has happened before, (the experienced past), and consonant with the plan for the future. In the trial of the moment, the Jew prays to be able to find that part of the jig-saw puzzle which will make the entire puzzle take fuller shape and more understandable form. He seeks the thread of meaningful continuity. For this reason, the prayer mood for the Jew, is best created by a review of man's past associations with God, and a study of man's role in the purposeful plan for the future. Properly, then, the Jew prays in a manner in which the present problem is viewed, not in isolation, but in the context of many similar problems. This is one of the reasons that prayer in the synagogue, seems almost to ignore the problem of the specific moment, except as to include it in the context of historic searching. In the synagogue service, it may seem that the present problems of the worshipper are completely ignored, for the concentration seems to be on reviewing the purpose of creation, the historic mission of the Jew, his past problems, and the general problems of all human beings in the light of the working towards the messianic future. Surely, by placing his problem in the midst of such a context, the worshipper has his pain lessened, and his hope heightened, for, above all, he is not alone.

The Jew who seeks the solution to a personal problem, prays first to attune himself to the proper path; he seeks the divinely indicated way, the Torah. The answer to his prayer is indicated when the worshipper feels an added resolve and a sharper understanding of the purposeful steps he must now take in solving his problems.

In praying, the Jew understands that God himself, follows certain laws, not only in His actions, but also in His being. God, to the Jew, is "ha-o-mer v'-o'sea", "He who says and does." That is to say, God is "He, to whom speech and deed are one." There is no difference between His word and His deed. Here again, we have an insight into an understanding of prayer. Prayer is our way of "speaking with God." But, to God, speaking is equal to doing. Therefore, to engage in a conversation with God, using words, one must be prepared to enter into a more active relationship also. Part of each prayer, therefore, must be the question, "Lord, what must I do?"

Judaism considers that the laws which govern God's personality are the laws of love, the laws of justice, and the laws of mercy. The law of love, requires giving, a part of which is creating. So it is that our prayer-book teaches that God created the world because of His love. It tells us that the fact of continuous creation, (each day God renews the deeds of creation), is evidence of God's continuing love. While any concept of God must necessarily be broad and vague, Jews teach that God is the ultimate pattern of love and justice. Prayer is the means we use to contact that living pattern or reservoir, (for it is not static), in order that we might be refreshed, reinvigorated, and reminded of the image in which we should mould ourselves, for it is our duty to imitate God.

The Rabbis, commenting upon the verse in Genesis, "Let us make man in OUR image", taught, God says to every man and woman, "Let us make man." That is, God says to the individual, "Let us together, you and I, create man, for, what you do with yourself, is a significant part of the creation."

Prayer, in the Jewish sense, must be based on this premise. Our prayer cannot be a lazyman's prayer. We must pray, "O Lord, I accept my role as co-creator of myself. I am as yet unfinished and imperfect. Help me to understand what I must do so that I may labor with You in my own creation." Prayer is the search for the best means to help oneself, following the pattern, (reservoir), that one understands as God.

The reference to God as a pattern can be misleading, for we can possibly conclude that the pattern is fixed and frozen. Similarly, the reference to God as the source of law, and the affirmation of the fact that man and the universe operate on the basis of law, can lead one to conclude that "God set the world in motion. Now it operates on the basis of law. What's God doing now?" Indeed, there are many who believe that God is simply some kind of "First Cause", and now the universe operates as a wonderfully efficient mechanism, much like some kind of super-univac. Any scientist knows, however, that the best mechanical device breaks down and must be occasionally corrected. The best watch occasionally decreases in accuracy, and must be re-wound and tuned. At worst, we could say that God continues to wind the watch of the world when it runs down, but this is not at all our understanding of God.

Perhaps we can understand Judaism's reference to the living law, if we consider the laws as an emanation from God. They are part of his living being, in the same sense that the rays of the sun are not the sun, and yet they represent the living presence of the sun. The rays of the sun are the heat and light, the energy force, which derive from the sun. They are not the sun, but they have no existence apart from the sun. If we blot out the sun, there is no heat or light on earth, no day and no growth. On the other hand, if the sun does not give out its rays, it is not at all the sun, it becomes something else again! In other words, while the rays are completely dependent on the sun and have no being apart from it, they are an essential part of the sun's being, and the sun would be something else again entirely if it did not project these rays.

Even so does Judaism understand God's Torah, which we Reform Jews believe is woven into the fabric and being of the universe, although we have only imperfectly understood and recorded this Torah so far. His laws reflect God's living and continuing presence. They are not God, but they reflect His love, justice, forgiveness. They have in them, the qualities and characteristics and power of God. They are not merely a mechanistic representation of Him. They derive continually from Him as the sun's rays continually derive from the sun.

Judaism teaches that one of the aspects of God's nature is that he considers himself bound by law. The natural response to this suggestion, is to ask, "Does this mean that God himself, is confined? That there are things He may or may not do?" Historical Judaism is based on the fact that God made a covenant, an agreement with Israel, to which He is bound, as well as ourselves. It is perhaps this assurance that God is with him that has enabled the Jew to survive his many hardships. The meteoric rise of the Jew in modern Israel, as in other eras, after a severe holocaust, is rooted in the Jew's belief that

the powers of God are with him, and that there is always "another chance." The Jew considers that he has never been alone in his troubles. God has always been with him. The conviction of the Jew that God cannot escape His pact with the Jewish people, is part of our understanding of the nature of God. He is a God of covenant.

We understand that this law applies also to God's relations with mankind, and even with the universe. Jeremiah speaks of the divine covenant with the stars and the heavens. Genesis speaks of the covenant made with Noah not to destroy the world. The concept of covenant is part of the Jewish understanding that God rules man and the world by law, but he is not beyond the law. He, too, is bound by the covenant, because it is part of His being. It is part of His decision, His creation.

Judaism teaches that, as we attempt to learn the laws operating in the universe, as we come into knowing contact with these laws, we are, in effect, contacting God. When we attempt to apply these laws, especially when we attempt to act them out, in terms of love and justice, we are working with God, identifying with Him, sharing His being, and making ourselves in His image.

We might say that there are several steps in the process of imitating God, and thus expressing our own divine nature. First, is the step of discovery. In this step, we seek to learn the nature of God. That is, we seek to discover, not only the details of His creation, but, also, the basis on which it operates, the fundamental law. After we discover the law, it is necessary for us to apply the law, so, the second step is application, or work. As we live out the law or apply it, we make ourselves in its image; we become like God, whose nature is expressed in the law. Over and over again, our Bible instructs, "Thou shalt love and fear God.... and perform His laws".

For Judaism, then, prayer is in large part, the search for the God behind the law, who is revealed through His law, whether that law is expressed in the processes of the physical universe, in the mind of man, or, in human society. Prayer is a search, not so much for a mystical experience, as for a "Way", a plan, a path, a guide to conduct. For Jews, the mystical experience is a by-product of the search; it is not the goal of the search. For Jews, part of the answer to prayer is the learning of the direction in which we must move to solve our problems. If, in our search, in our learning and discovery, we can discern the indicated path of behavior that leads to the fuller life, we know that we have communed with God, and we know further that He shall continue to walk with us along the higher path that we choose to take. The God-contacting experience does not end with the conclusion of the prayer, be it meditation or verbalization. The fellowship with God continues through the dedicated conduct that the prayer inspires. Prayer, and Torah-guided activity, are part of one continuing process. He who walks with the living laws, walks with the living God. As it is written in Genesis, "And Abraham walked with God... because he hearkened to His voice."