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## The Sage from San Fernando

Stuart Schoffman. *The Jerusalem Report*. Jerusalem: Oct 20, 1994. pg. 47

### Abstract (Summary)

Schulweis's book is far less about Jewish law than about leading a life that is connected with God. Judaism for [Harold M. Schulweis] is holistic - religious denominations go utterly unmentioned - and pluralistic. "There are more and better things within tradition than you were taught," he tells his archetypal reader, who Schulweis takes to be religiously trapped: "Paradoxically, the only religious notions he considers authentic are those he cannot believe; the only ones he can believe are those he thinks to be in-authentic."

Is a major insight of the Jewish tradition." The renowned philosopher-rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, relates Schulweis, delighted in telling evening audiences that he had just witnessed a miracle - namely, the setting sun. The essence of prayer is not to ask God for a pony, good grades or lower blood pressure - that's magical thinking - but to locate and energize that part of ourselves that participates in divinity: "The ideal of David was in the marble before Michelangelo touched it. The ideal of the divine image is in the soul before it is touched by prayer. The worshiper is a sculptor who painstakingly carves his self after the divine image. Plotinus advised, "Withdraw into yourself and if you do not like what you see, act as a sculptor. Cut away here, smooth there, make this line lighter, this one purer. Never cease carving until there shines out from you the Godlike sphere of character."

Nor is Jewish observance entirely scanted here. Schulweis discusses life-cycle rituals and the major festivals as means of transmitting "the ethos and mythos of a people." (The Sabbath gets only a page - it is "a day of deeper breathing," a time "to become aware of the gifts of inner tranquility" - but one hopes Schulweis is saving it for another book.) The urge of many socially conscious Jews to feel universal and not parochial invites the pitfall voiced in the Song of Songs: "They made me the keeper of the vineyards but my own vineyard I have not kept." Only through the particulars of Jewish life can a meaningful universality be approached. Schulweis cites Abraham Halevi Kook, the great mystic and former chief rabbi of Israel: "The community must first find itself within itself; then it must find itself in all of humanity."

### Full Text (1410 words)

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A leading L.A. rabbi offers an invaluable spiritual guidebook for Jewish skeptics *For Those Who Can't Believe: Overcoming the Obstacles to Faith*, by Harold M. Schulweis. HarperCollins; 216pp.; \$20.

Religious wisdom is not always trumpeted from the mountaintop.

From the unlikely shallows of the San Fernando Valley, fabled mecca of materialism and mangled English, comes a lovely book every Jew can learn from.

At first glance the title, cover layout, large print, and author bio of "For Those Who Can't Believe" - "Rabbi Schulweis is spiritual leader of Congregation Beth Shalom in Encino, California" - might reasonably suggest a Jewish New Age self-improvement quickie to be parked on your nightstand alongside "How to Write a Great Screenplay in Three Weeks."

And yes, the book is clear and accessible, plainly addressed to assimilated Jews and others who are "indifferent to religion," and aims, in the author's words, "to present alternative responses to rigid approaches that shut off the possibilities of spiritual renewal for seekers of all faiths."

But Schulweis, a veteran leader of Conservative Jewry, is an experienced religious counselor, a trained philosopher and a nimble prose stylist capable of flashes of poetry. This is a challenging book, full of serious religious *tachlis*.

For many readers, practical religion means doing - how and when to put on tefillin or sit shivah or kasher your kitchen.

But Schulweis's book is far less about Jewish law than about leading a life that is connected with God. Judaism for Schulweis is holistic - religious denominations go utterly unmentioned - and pluralistic. "There are more and better things within tradition than you were taught," he tells his archetypal reader, who Schulweis takes to be religiously trapped: "Paradoxically, the only religious notions he considers authentic are those he cannot believe; the only ones he can believe are those he thinks to be in-authentic."

So many of us are hamstrung, argues Schulweis, by the sort of "either/or thinking" that insists, for example, that the Torah is either literally true or make-believe. Too many Jews are turned off in their youth by tales of implausible miracles performed by an anthropomorphic, sky-dwelling Almighty, and never find their way back to God.

"Literalism," Schulweis writes, "counts the rungs of Jacob's ladder while ignoring the vision of his dream." Miracles are what happens in nature, not outside of it. "The signs of transcendence are discovered within the ordinary course of living. To see the divine in the natural and rational..."

is a major insight of the Jewish tradition." The renowned philosopher-rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, relates Schulweis, delighted in telling evening audiences that he had just witnessed a miracle - namely, the setting sun. The essence of prayer is not to ask God for a pony, good grades or lower blood pressure - that's magical thinking - but to locate and energize that part of ourselves that participates in divinity: "The ideal of David was in the marble before Michelangelo touched it. The ideal of the divine image is in the soul before it is touched by prayer. The worshiper is a sculptor who painstakingly carves his self after the divine image. Plotinus advised, 'Withdraw into yourself and if you do not like what you see, act as a sculptor. Cut away here, smooth there, make this line lighter, this one purer. Never cease carving until there shines out from you the Godlike sphere of character.'"

As it is written, continues Schulweis, in the Talmud, Tractate Sotah 14a: "How are we to understand the Biblical verse Deuteronomy 13:5: 'After the Lord your God ye shall walk'?... It means to walk after His attributes: As He clothes the naked, do thou clothe the naked; as He visits the sick, do thou visit the sick; ... as He buries the dead, do thou also bury the dead." Or, as the poet Wallace Stevens said: "The mind that in heaven created the earth and the mind that on earth created the heaven were, as it happened, one." Or, if you like, the Hasidic master Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk: "Man is the language of God."

It is this deft amalgam of cross-cultural scholarship, warm Jewish tradition, sound logic and an ear for a great quote that makes "For Those Who Believe" so appealing and persuasive.

Schulweis wisely identifies himself with no ideological camp, but implies his label of choice from time to time by invoking the friendly phrases "theistic humanism" or "spiritual humanism." Only the most rigid Scrooge of an atheist can fail to be seduced by the midrash in Deuteronomy Rabbah: "Wherever you see the footprints of human beings, God stands before you."

This does not mean - far from it - that Schulweis has done away with the God of earthquakes, cancer, and the Holocaust. But if such horrors are acts of God, how can He be said to be good? Judaism lacks a Satan to pin evil on. Instead we draw a distinction between two of God's qualities as reflected in His Hebrew names: Elohim the God of nature and "the reality principle," Adonai "the Lord of morality" and "the ideality principle."

It is Elohim who flings the thunderbolts which we accept with deep awe, or else meet with anger or "holy dissent." When we speak of religious life as man imitating God, it is Adonai we have in mind. God did not die in the Holocaust; our faith is kept alive by the brave gentiles - Schulweis says there may have been as many as 500,000 of them - who rescued Jews.

Schulweis takes a well-deserved swipe at Bernie Siegel, the best-selling cancer surgeon who suggests, along with all the good heal-yourself stuff in his books, that patients are responsible for their illness. This is bad for the patient, and moreover, "the self takes the place of God." On the other hand, Schulweis does "not believe that sickness is a divine punishment" or "a chastisement meant to correct some transgression..."

Flowers wither, leaves fall, the earth cracks open, none the result of a supernal judging God, but of Elohim, the mother of the universe, creator of lion and lamb, eagle and dove, and all the ways of the earth."

Sounds just a little like "Black Elk Speaks," but I have to tell you, it works for me, and I think it will for you too. Naturally one can poke holes in the argument - okay, "Nature pursues its own course,"

said the rabbis, and the Northridge Quake in his own community was "fault-free,"

somberly puns Schulweis, but doesn't God at least have the power to prevent Nature from zapping somebody He likes?

But searching for holes is also part of the spiritual life. Skeptics ought to read this book just to put their opinions to a healthy skeptical test. Strict traditionalists will find worlds of things to argue with - how can you write a book about religion and not emphasize Jewish law? - but the book suggests so many helpful pathways to the apprehension of God that I cannot believe it would not strengthen the faith of the faithful.

Nor is Jewish observance entirely scanted here. Schulweis discusses life-cycle rituals and the major festivals as means of transmitting "the ethos and mythos of a people." (The Sabbath gets only a page - it is "a day of deeper breathing," a time "to become aware of the gifts of inner tranquility" - but one hopes Schulweis is saving it for another book.) The urge of many socially conscious Jews to feel universal and not parochial invites the pitfall voiced in the Song of Songs: "They made me the keeper of the vineyards but my own vineyard I have not kept." Only through the particulars of Jewish life can a meaningful universality be approached. Schulweis cites Abraham Halevi Kook, the great mystic and former chief rabbi of Israel: "The community must first find itself within itself; then it must find itself in all of humanity."

I pray this rich book will speedily be translated into Hebrew, for it is one that Israelis urgently need to read - not least secularists who foolishly figure that religion is tantamount to established Orthodoxy and turn their backs on the whole business.

Our tradition, as Schulweis understates, "is far from monolithic."

Long may we ponder the wisdom of the Zohar: "Woe to the man who compares God with any single attribute of God."

o Rabbi Harold Schulweis: Religious counselor, trained philosopher and nimble prose stylist

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