The Psychological Jew
An Article by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

The Theological Voice

Evil

Once I conceive of God as a person like myself, He becomes open to criticism. The paradigm case in the Bible is that of Abraham confronting the sovereign God with righteous indignation. "Shall the judge of all the earth not do justly?" God as a moral person is drawn too close for comfort. If God is to retain His sovereignty, His vulnerability to criticism must be shielded.

Here enter the religious doctors who in defense of God insist on differentiating God from human beings. God hears, thinks, feels, and acts—but not as we hear, think, feel, and act. The theologians fall back on the prophet's defense: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah55:9). To protect God the theological defenders maintain that … God is not like us. God is different not only in degree but also in kind. If God is all knowing, all powerful, all good, these are not the attributes that humans understand when referring to such qualities. Critically it means that God cannot be said to be moral in the manner that we are moral.

That very moral distancing of God from ourselves raises many resentments. We hear it in the outburst of the philosopher John Stuart Mill: "I will call no being good who is not what I mean when I apply the epithet to my fellow creatures, and if such a being can sentence me to hell, to hell I will go." …God is now portrayed as standing over against man. In elevating God, the human being is now drawn increasingly subordinate to the will and acts of God. An alienating dualism has intruded in the original picture, splitting the divine and the human, "above" from "below" …

We have been taught to think of God as a noun: it names something. To protect that noun from human moral criticism, the qualities that describe it cannot retain the meanings they have in everyday use. The qualities of God's love, justice, and compassion are not ours. The price for making the God-noun invulnerable to human judgment is, in effect, to free it from any and all moral qualifications. The noun stands detached from verbs, adverbs, adjectives. Consequently, the human-divine discourse of the dialogue is broken.

Godliness

I propose a shift of focus, from noun to verb, from subject to predicate, from God as person to Godliness, in Hebrew, *Elohut.* Not the qualities of divinity but the divinity of the qualities is essential to belief. To illustrate this inversion, let's turn to the liturgical life and specifically to the translation of benedictions. How are the blessings of the prayer book to be understood in accordance with the idea of Godliness? One of the first blessings we learn is the benediction over bread: "Blessed art Thou O Lord our God King of the universe who brings forth bread from the earth."

With the idea of Godliness in mind, we direct our attention not to the noun but to the activity that brings forth bread from the earth. What are the events that bring this bread to the table? The benediction is a meditation on the transactions between nature and human beings in the process. The transactions involve the given-ness of the earth, water, sun, and seed (attributed to Elohim, God) and

the preparations of the soil, the weeding and plowing, grinding and baking (attributed to Adonai, the Lord that through human beings transforms nature).

To believe in Godliness is to believe in the verbs and adverbs that refer to the activities of divinity. To behave in a godly fashion is to realize in one's life the attributes of Godliness that are potential in all human and nonhuman energies. Atheism is not the disbelief in the reality and goodness of the noun but disbelief in the reality and goodness of the attributes. The question to be asked of those who seek God is not whether they believe in a noun that cannot be known but whether they believe in the gerunds of Godliness: healing the sick, feeding the hungry, supporting the fallen, pursuing peace, loving the neighbor.

I know nothing of God as a noun. I know, from the collective experiences of my people, recorded in sacred texts and from my own experiences, only the gerunds, the verbs, of God: healing the sick, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, pursuing peace, loving my people and my neighbors. I am bound to testify to the verbs of God by the adverbs of my conduct. God is behaved.

The arguments for God's existence and goodness are not furnished by inductive or deductive logic. The evidence is in our mouths, hands and feet. Individually and collectively we are the verifiers of God's reality. The prophet proclaimed in God's name: "You are my witnesses." The midrash added: "If you are My witnesses, I am God. And if you are not, I am, as it were, not God." Religious beliefs are conditional. They demand our behavioral testimony. What does it mean that you or I believe? What does the answer tell me about you or myself? Not whether we believe, not whether we obey, but what kind of God we believe in and what imperatives we are prepared to obey. (*For Those Who Can't Believe)*

Conscience

Conscience is the inner witness to the covenant that carries the divine and human signatures. Despite the apparent contradictions to God's word, conscience appeals to the God within God. Therefore, God registers no insult or anger against the challenge of conscience directed to Him. On the contrary, God recognizes in the holy dissent of the prophetic heroes His own truth.

The status and role of conscience in religion cast a different complexion on revelation. Revelation is not a one-way directive from above or a human projection from below. Revelation is the dialogue of reciprocal covenant, an ongoing process of listening and interpreting, of receiving and giving. Awareness of having entered the covenant makes it impossible to separate the divine and human element in the encounter of revelation. Conscience is the hyphen of the human-divine covenant that runs both ways. Conscience and commandment are not rivals but co-respondents of a moral covenant.

The Self

Where do I find God? How do I begin to pray? Begin with yourself. Because in Judaism, the self is regarded as the unique and indispensable link to God. Jewish thinking is rooted in the deepest and most revolutionary verse in the Bible, one that resonates throughout Jewish thought: The 27th verse in the second chapter of Genesis. "And God created the human being in His image, in the image of God created He him. Male and female created He them." Listen to the wisdom – older than Enlightenment, older than humanism. There is a *tselem*, an image of God, implanted in you. The image of God is found nowhere in the universe except in the human self in whom God breathes *"Nishmat chayim"* – the divine breath of life. In you is a "*neshamah*", a soul whose origin is God. In real prayer I am confronted by the image of divinity that mirrors my inner soul.

One midrash puts it brilliantly: The angels having heard that God planned to create the human being in His image, grew jealous. What does mere mortal man have to deserve such a gift? The angels plotted to hide the image of God from the human being. One angel suggested that it be hid on the tallest mountain. Another suggested that it be sunk into the deep of the sea. But the shrewdest angel demurred "Man," he said, "is an adventurer. He will climb the highest mountain. He will plumb the deepest ocean. But if we want to hide it from him let us hide the image in himself. It is the last place in the world that he will seek it." The *tselem* – the image of God in us is the closest thing that reflects God. We have been created with divine capacities to think, to feel, to reason, to act, to choose. This is the reflection of God in us.

The ***tselem Elohim*** – the image of God within you – is no orphan. The image of God in you grows and must be constantly refined. The ***tselem*** is a potentiality that requires realization. The ***tselem*** is not born complete. It is always becoming. How? By interaction between commandments, mitzvot, by biblical, rabbinic, liturgical texts of four millennia. You read them but not blindly, mechanically, impersonally. You have to allow the narratives of your ancestors, the patriarchs and matriarchs, the priests and sages, to pour into you. But you are not a passive receptacle. Your soul is a filter through which the culture of four millennia flows.

You ask "Does God really exist?" I answer "Do <u>you</u> really exist?"
You ask "Does God really care?" I ask in turn "Do <u>you</u> really care?"
You ask "Does God raise up the fallen?" I ask "Do <u>you</u> raise up the fallen?"
You ask "Does God intervene?" I ask "Do <u>you</u> intervene?"
You ask "Does God hear prayer?" I ask "Do <u>you</u> hear your prayers?"

<u>Two Names for God</u>

God is One, but it is significant that more than one name of Divinity is used throughout the Bible and the prayer book. Two of the most prominent names of Divinity usually found side by side are Elohim (God) and Adonai (Lord). Elohim refers to the God of creation, the God of nature, the ground of natural laws. Elohim is the cause of the world as it is. Elohim is the God of the reality principle, the way things are, not the way things ought to be; the God of the laws of gravitation in contrast with the laws of moral revelation.

The face of Elohim reveals only part of the persona of Divinity. Adonai is the other half. The countenance of Adonai moves us to transform the givenness of nature that weighs heavily upon us. If the counsel of Elohim leads to acceptance, the urgings of Adonai call for transformation. Adonai relates to what human nature may do to control and repair nature. Elohim is the source of the powers of nature; Adonai is the ground of moral goodness.

The two dimensions of divinity belong together: Elohim, the God of nature, and Adonai, the Lord of morality; Elohim, the God of necessity, and Adonai the Lord of possibility; Elohim, the God of what is, and Adonai, the Lord of what ought to be; Elohim, the God of acceptance, and Adonai, the God of transformation. Their unity embraces the oneness of reality. "Ought" is as real as "is." Without Elohim, the ideals of Adonai are adrift. Without Adonai, reality is robbed of real possibility and restricted to the status quo. To live with Elohim alone is to know nature without the powers to repair the world as given. To live with Adonai alone is to live by dreams without the hands and feet of reality. The traditional benediction joins Elohim and Adonai.

Adonai-Elohim remind me that it is never too late to change my direction to alter my world, not by magic incantations or manipulations of the cards. But by faith-wisdom to open myself to the caring forces I cannot always define but can feel surge within me. In sickness and in dying, it is never too late. Living I teach, dying I teach. Others I love learn from my bearing, my posture. Blessed art Thou Adonai-Elohim who has created within us the power and promise of your united image.

The Holocaust

To know me, to know us, is necessarily to understand the Holocaust. The Holocaust remains the dominant psychic reality of our lives.

It is clear that the children must know it all. And yet I wonder whether in transmitting the memory of the Holocaust I lay a stone upon their hearts. Do I plant in them the seeds of cynicism…Do I inadvertently rob them of the possibility of a normal and healthy relationship with a non-Jewish world?

The Holocaust mocks my faith. For at the core of that faith is the conviction that God breathed into the nostrils of human beings an inviolable human soul, that God created the human being in His image and in His likeness. The taunting dissonance between that faith and the facts of the Holocaust disturbs my belief.

The theological crisis wrought by the Shoah is radical. Not whether God is dead but whether we are dead; not whether God exists but whether goodness is real or merely the invention of human conceit.

Where was God while all this took place? Elohim was in Auschwitz. We can adduce morally neutral factors – economic, political, military – that can be traced to the impartial energy of Elohim…But where was Adonai in Auschwitz?

I direct attention to the tens of thousands of non-Jews, Christian believers and non-believers, young and old who came from every walk of life to risk their lives and those of their children and saved Jews pursued and persecuted by the Nazis and their collaborators. Some of these rescuers live among us. I have met many of them, and I have read validated accounts of their actions by Jewish survivors in every land in which the Nazis tread. I have looked at the faces of these ordinary human beings, made of flesh and blood like our own, who hid people of another faith and another tradition in their own closets, attics, sewers, pigsties, holes in the ground. It is important to know of the risks to life itself by these non-Jews who forged passports, falsified baptismal certificates, and organized underground safety and escape routes.

Where was Adonai in the Holocaust? Adonai was in Niuvelande, a Dutch village in which seven hundred residents rescued five hundred Jews including one hundred Jewish children. The entire population of Niuvelande acted as rescuers. Every single household took one Jewish family or at least one Jew into their home. No one feared being informed upon by his neighbor because everyone was implicated in the crime of concealing a Jew. Adonai was among the simple folk, the house painters, bakers, postmen, who met frightened children at the trains and gave them food, shelter and love in their own homes. Adonai was in Le Chambon Sur Lignon whose citizens hid and protected five thousand Jews under the inspired leadership of pastor Andre Trocme. Adonai was in the rat infested sewers of Lvov where Polish sewer workers hid seventeen Jews for fourteen months.

…with this unheralded evidence of oral heroism brought to light you can correct the distortion of history that no one cared, that no church helped, that there was no conspiracy of goodness in the lands where

the Nazi shadow fell. That canard not only distorts the past but cripples the future because it is used to insist that there were no allies, are no allies and will be no allies to call upon. That dismissal of the evidence of rescue, however small, helps twist history into a metaphysical fatalism that ordains anti-Semitism as an eternal recurrence. Beneath the cry "never again" is whispered a deeper pessimistic verdict on all Jewish history: "ever again."

The bending of history into a bifurcating metaphysics that violates the memory of the good destroys the hope for the possibilities of the future. It serves no honor to the victims and martyrs of the Holocaust to transmogrify its incomparable tragedy into a polarizing philosophy. Paralyzing pessimism is not the lesson to be learned from the art of memory. Memory must keep an eye on the future. If it is blind to its moral potential, memory leaves in its wake a dark and paralyzing depression. It is not necessary to falsify the past in order to sustain the morale of our children. It is necessary to unearth the reality of goodness so that children can retain "the basic trust" that the psychologist Erik Erikson maintained was essential for their vitality.

The Prophetic Voice

Universalism & Particularism

For a Jew to love Judaism is to love humanity. That is basic Jewish theology. The God of Israel is not tribal. The traditional formula for our liturgy reads, "Blessed are Thou O Lord our God, King of the universe." *Melech ha-olam.* We are the custodians of the world and its inhabitants.

Compassion and justice are not like pieces of pie. Cut a slice for yourself; you take away from the other. Your pie is too small. Your God is too small. True love and mercy are inclusive, expansive, embracing, enlarging …Like charity, love begins at home, but it must not end there. If it ends there, it's not love and charity but tribal narcissism…It is a false choice: Do you love your children or the children of others? On the contrary, because we love our children, we love other children. Because we love our families, we love other families. Because we mourn our Holocaust, we mourn the holocausts of the world (Loyalty to Jews or to Humanity? 2006).

[The] Jewish vision of God enlarges us, elevates us, exalts us. To believe in God the Creator of the universe means that nothing in this world, that no people in this world, is foreign to our concerns. Because of our belief in God, the whole world is relevant to us: Israel, of course, Israel is the apple of our eye. Israel is the chief of our joys and concerns, but also Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, China. Is it too much to place on our Jewish agenda? Then it is we who are too small for the God of creation. (Jonah in the Whale and in Us, 1994)

Judaism gave the world not ziggurats or pyramids or mausoleums, but compassion and responsibility. We gave the world a sacred humanism… We gave to the world a sacred universalism that remains at the foundation of our relationship with the world. (Globalism and the Jewish Conscience, 2008)

Morality & Law

The Torah is a law of life, of truth and of peace. The Torah is no cold slab of stone thrown down from heaven. The Torah was written in the language of human beings for our understanding and for our moral fulfillment. Jews have the right, and the tradition, to interpret the text so that it sanctifies God's name, our lives and that of our children. This is no heresy. The Rabbis of the tradition over and again dealt with morally problematic biblical verses that they would not allow to rest on their literal meaning.

They interpreted the biblical "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" so that it did not remain the Jewish way to compensate for injury.

In the Talmud, a deaf-mute was considered to be retarded, mentally incompetent, an imbecile not able to serve or witness or to be counted in the minyan or able to affect marriage or divorce. But that ruling was based on empirically false data. On a visit to the Vienna Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, Rabbi Simchah Sofer saw that their impaired speech and hearing had nothing to do with their intelligence and accountability, and urged altering the older rabbinic judgment. The law and its legal interpretations are rooted in history. Every text has its context. The laws of leprosy were in Bible times thought to be contagious and originate in the sin of slander or other transgressions. Who today would apply the quarantine and sacrificial purification for an illness we have learned to identify as Hansen's disease? Who would maintain that disease is a punishment from God?

It is a calumny against Halachah to treat it as so much dead weight. Those who know its history know that Halachah changes with new knowledge and with new moral sensibilities. Consider only the cases in which the rabbis nullified or circumvented the biblical law as in the case of the "ben sorer v'moreh" the rebellious delinquent son who could be brought to the elders and be stoned for his abominable acts (Deuteronomy 21:18) or the case of the "sotah", the wife suspected of adultery to whom the ordeal of jealousy was given (Numbers 5:12), or the case of the "ir nidachat" – the heretical city tainted with idolatry which was to be destroyed (Deuteronomy 13:13). All these biblical laws were dismissed by the rabbis of the Talmud as purely theoretical but having no application to life. "Lo hayah v'lo atid lihyot."

The Community Voice

The Psychological Jew

We are confronted with a new character ideal, with a radically different kind of Jew, the newest sociological phenomenon in our history. We face the emerging "psychological Jew." The psychological Jew is *sui generis*. He is radically different from the other familiar types. He is on principle a privatist. For this post-religious, post-ideological Jew, all community is suspect.

Psychological wisdom, not communal loyalty, leads him to join a negative community. For even in affiliation, he is a Jew by double negation, i.e., he is not not a Jew. He is not a believer and not an atheist. He is not a Zionist and not an assimilationist. He is neither a Jewish loyalist nor is he vulnerable to conversion. His style is that of deconversion. He defuses all passionate attachments. His peculiar toleration of all is a consequence of his refusal to take any single option seriously enough to live it out "with all your heart and all your soul and all your might." Passion for communal causes, religious or secular, is anathema.

The complaint that the synagogue is cold and irrelevant will not be answered from the pulpit and not from the seminary. Without the matrix of community, one cannot speak of peoplehood or of the wisdom, ethics and aspirations of that people. Without the concreteness of inter-personal relationship, the rhetoric of I-thou dialogue between man and man and between God and man is vacuous. At best, Judaism turns into a meta-language, a way of speaking.

The primary task on the agenda of the synagogue is the humanization and personalization of the temple. To overcome the interpersonal irrelevance of synagogue affiliation is a task prior to believing and ritual

behaving. To experience true belonging is an imperative prerequisite for the cultivation of religious and moral sensibilities. ("*Restructuring the Synagogue*")

The Empty Synagogue

"Help me," they are saying. "Pay attention to my personal life. I am falling apart. Stop telling me what I can do for the sake of Judaism, for the sake of the synagogue, for Zion's sake, for the sake of mitzvot. Tell me instead, oh tell me, what Judaism can do for me, what the synagogue can do for me, what the Jewish community can do for me, what mitzvot can do for me. Tell me what *you* can do for me, you, rabbi."

These are not the questions I was trained to answer. I have been raised to speak the language of *r'shut harabim*, the discourse of the public agenda. Neither my home background nor my seminary training prepared me to handle these cries out of the *r'shut hayachid*, from the private domain.

Abraham Joshua Heschel warned us: "Torah speaks in the language of men. But the sages have overlooked *the man in the Jew*. They gained no insight into his difficulties and failed to understand his dilemma. Every generation has its own problems. Every man is burdened with anxieties. But the sages remained silent: they did not guide the perplexed and showed no regard for the new problems that arose."