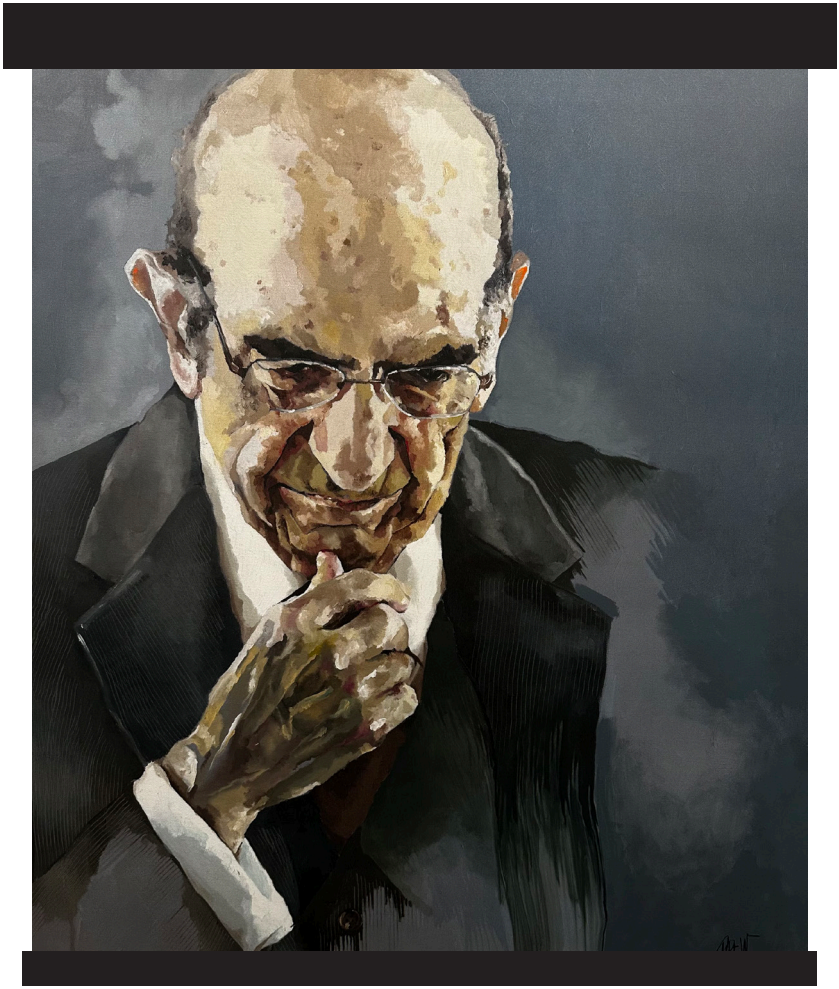

THE CENTENNIAL YEAR OF RABBI HAROLD M. SCHULWEIS 1925-2014

Tenth Yahrzeit
Commemoration Shabbat
December 20-21, 2024

Friday, December 20, *Presentation of Ami Aloni's "Or Ha-Am" with the LA Jewish Symphony and VBS Choir*

Saturday, December 21, *"In Pursuit of Godliness," learning with Rabbi Feinstein and friends*

.....

January, 2025
VBS College of Jewish Studies presents, "A Revolutionary Rabbinate – the Vision of Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis"

.....

Spring, 2025
Celebrating the Centennial of Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

God.

Where then?
God not in me
nor in you.
But between us.

God not me or mine
nor you or yours
But ours.

God known
not alone
but in relationship.

Not revealed through
lonely power
but through our kinship,
friendship
healing, binding
raising up of each other.

To know God is to know others
to love God is to love others
to hear God is to hear others

GODLINESS

A young man once came to Menachem Mendel of Kotzk and complained,
"Rebbe, I can no longer believe in God."
"Why is that?" the Rebbe inquired.
"I cannot believe in God because the world is so filled with pain, with suffering, with ugliness and with evil. How could there be a God in such a world?!" the young man answered.
"Why do you care?" asked the Rebbe
"What do you mean, why do I care?" the frustrated young man explained. "How could a person not care?! Innocent people suffer, the world is ruled by the cruel and the heartless, its beauty is drowning in evil. I care because it hurts me so and I can't understand why a God would let it be this way!"
Again, the Rebbe inquired, "But why do you care?"
The young man grew even more exasperated. "Someone has to care! Someone has to witness the pain of the world and cry. If not, then all the suffering is meaningless. If no one cries, then the universe is a dark, lifeless place. I care because I want with all my heart to see a better world for my children and for theirs. I owe it to them to care!"
And again, the Rebbe asked, "But why do you care?"
And now the young man lost his composure altogether and he wept. "I care. I have to care. I must. It's what and who I am."
"Well then," the Rebbe responded, "If you care that much,then God exists."

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 & REVELATION

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 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.

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 "*Nishmath 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 *tzelem*—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 *tzelem* is a potentiality that requires realization. The *tzelem* 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 a ncestors, 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 you really exist?"
> You ask "Does God really care?" I ask in turn "Do you really care?"
> You ask "Does God raise up the fallen?" I ask "Do you raise up the fallen?"
> You ask "Does God intervene?" I ask "Do you intervene?"
> You ask, "Does God hear prayer?" I ask "Do you hear your prayers?"

TRUE PRAYER

In true prayer, the worshiper is included not as a passive supplicant, but as a knowing, active agent through whom the petition may be realized. Therefore, every petition includes an understood addendum — "**through me**," or "**through us**."

"Bring health to the sick through me, through us."
"Feed the hungry through me, through us."
"Grant peace to the world through me, through us."
The gerunds of true prayer—loving, caring, healing—call upon human collaboration where [conventional] Prayer is incomplete, for it overlooks the arms, legs and hands of Godliness.

. . . . . .

THE UNIVERSAL AND THE PARTICULAR

"Am I a Jew or a human being? Do I owe my loyalties to my people or to humanity-at-large?" The question is misleading and untrue to the noblest character of the Jewish tradition. There is a Jewish response to poverty, a Jewish response to homelessness, a Jewish response to prejudice, a Jewish response to hatred. That response derives from a unique sacred and secular literature, from four millennia of uniquely lived life. Like the Bible itself, authentic Jewish universalism begins at home but ends by becoming the treasure of the world. There is a uniqueness in Jewish universalism.

Open the first pages of the book of Genesis: The first eleven chapters do not deal with a Jew—not with Abraham nor Isaac nor Jacob nor Moses nor Aaron. It deals with Adam, and Adam as the archetype of humanity. Adam is not a Jew—the name is derived from "*adamah*" which means "earth". And when the sages ask, "From which place in the universe was this earth taken? Was it from Athens or Rome? The answer given is that it was taken from four corners of the earth: north, south, east and west. And what was the color of this clay that formed the human being? Our sages answered, "It was black, and white, and red and yellow." God did not create religion. God created the universe and within the universe, humanity. God created every human being--man, woman, child—in God's image. Whatever color, whatever race, whatever ethnicity. God created every human being with Divine potentiality.

Our greatness as a religion is that we Jews conceived of ourselves as God's allies, as God's partners, as God's friends. We gave the world conscience. We gave to the world a sacred universalism that remains at the foundation of our relationship with the world. Our prophets cared about the ethical behavior of the Ammonites, the Hittites, Syrians and Babylonians. Our last prophet, Malachi, spoke to the world population: "Have we not one Father? Did not one God create us all? Did He who made me in my mother's belly not make him? Did not one God form us both in his womb?

Our children will not abandon Judaism because Judaism makes such great moral demands upon them. They may well abandon Judaism if we ask too little of them. We are a world people with a world civilization. We cannot engage in everything, we cannot complete the imperfections of this world. But we are not free to do everything we can. Is Judaism too big, too wide, too broad, too deep, too large? That is its grandeur, its uniqueness, its passion, its excitement, its challenge. We are allies with God, co-creators and co-sanctifiers.

GATHERING THE FOUR FRINGES

The *tallit* has four fringes. I gather them together and hold them in one hand. This action of collection is the gesture accompanying the prelude to the Sh'ma:

Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad
Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.

Oneness is a way of seeing the universe. Oneness is the way of finding the connection between myself and others. Oneness is the way I discover my connection with my people, with humanity, with my God and with myself.

Asked to explain the lack of connection within his self, a rabbinic sage replied:" I am conflicted because I do not say what I mean; I do not mean what I say. I do not do what I say; I do not say what I do." My goal is wholeness: unity, integration. I gather the fringes of my life together, the fringes of words, intentions, resolutions and deeds woven into one.

Holding the fringes together is a reminder of the sacred task of Yichud: to unify God's name in this world, to make the world one, to make me whole within myself, to unite my talents, ambitions, drives and impulses.

I find my own one-ness in the unity of God.

With the *tallit* draped across my shoulders I now gather separate parts and recite:

"*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha-olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hitateif ba-tzitzit*

Blessed art Thou who has sanctified us to realize the divine imperatives and has wrapped us in the fringed tallit."

WE ARE WITNESSES

Witnesses are we to the possibilities within the universe to the potentialities within and between us.

Witnesses are we to the unity, oneness of God's universe.

Witnesses are we to the capacity of men, women and children to join hearts and hands and bind the severed fabric of our lives.

Witnesses are we to the indescribable joys of wholeness, the healing of togetherness, the hope of oneness.

Witnesses are we before God and humanity that only in the embrace of togetherness is the tear mended and the fragments made whole.

The ***Harold M Schulweis Institute*** invites you to its latest exhibit, "***KERUV: the Inreach/Outreach of Rabbi Schulweis***" in the Ellie and Mark Lainer Beit Midrash, and online at www.hmsi@info.

KERUV:
Bringing Closer,
Inviting In

HMSI also invites you to enjoy its new podcast, titled ***Moral Courage: From the Study of Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis***. Episodes feature in-depth conversations between leading intellectuals and rabbis from around the country discussing the impact of Rabbi Schulweis. Produced by ***Mayim Bialik*** and ***Sad Clown Productions***, in conjunction with ***HMSI***, as well as host ***Rabbi Ari Averbach*** present the philosophy, influence, teachings and words of Rabbi Schulweis to a new generation. Available on all platforms.

• • • • •

Rabbi Harold M Schulweis was the most influential congregational rabbi in post-war American Jewish life. Born in the Bronx in 1925, educated at Yeshiva College, New York University and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, he served as rabbi of Valley Beth Shalom from 1970 until his death in 2014. Renowned worldwide for his theological vision, his moral leadership, and for the creative innovations he introduced into Jewish life, Rabbi Schulweis was beloved by the VBS community for his wisdom and compassion.

This year, Valley Beth Shalom marks both his tenth Yahrzeit and his 100th birthday, as he would want it—with music, learning, and community.