

"GOD IS ALIVE"

II. GETTING PERSONAL WITH GOD

In response to a flurry of publicity about a supposedly new school of theological thinking, we began, last Shabbat, a discussion of that movement which has captured the public fancy by capitalizing upon a slogan which is nothing more than a tortured blasphemy: "God is dead."

We discerned three ideas in this statement. The first is -- atheism: the positive belief that there is no God. The second is -- deism: the belief that there is a God, but He is not a personal God, and therefore we cannot speak of prayer or revelation.

Of course, Judaism utterly rejects both of these theses. In fact, there is nothing new about them, except the brazen hypocrisy of muttering blasphemies from a Chair of Theology or from a turned collar.

The third interpretation of this statement is the only one that has real importance for us, and that is: the loss by man of the feeling of God's closeness and nearness. In the modern scientific age, this has become almost a mass phenomenon: we believe, but it is faith and not feeling, assertion and not experience. We know that God exists, and that He has personality -- but we cannot find Him. We know He can relate; but why doesn't He?

We gave three explanations for this seeming withdrawal of God. The first was that the feeling of immediacy of man's relation and contact with God cannot be sustained. Second, there is the biblical doctrine of Hester Panim, the hiding of the face of God," which

means that God punishes man by withdrawing from the world and making Himself all but inaccessible to man. The third explanation was that frequently the very nature of the times makes the religious experience much more difficult to attain.

This diagnosis answers, or attempts to answer, the question of why there is alienation between man and God. The fundamental problem itself, however, remains: what can we do about it? How can we rediscover our relationship with God and experience His nearness? How may we overcome this cosmic estrangement?

Before proceeding to answer that question, let us point out that, as important as subjective the feelings are, Judaism does not stand or fall by how deeply we think we experience religious stirrings. Neither theology nor emotions will, in the long run, determine the quality of our lives; our conduct and behavior will.

Judaism has always valued objective observance over subjective experience. It is more important to act lovingly to our neighbor, than to feel warmth and tenderness for him in our hearts. It is more important to feed the poor man and alleviate his suffering than to melt in compassion and commiseration -- and do nothing. In a statement of surprising boldness, the Rabbis of the Talmud put into the mouth of God the following words: Halevai oti azavu v'et torati shamaru, "would that they abandon Me, as long as they observed My Torah!" God is willing that He Himself be forgotten provided that His will, His Torah, be carried out. It is more important to be Godly, than to believe in God.

And yet, having put the problem in this perspective, the question remains: how, after all, can we achieve in this twentieth century

the reconciliation between God and man, who have moved even farther  
~~from each other~~  
apart? <sup>A</sup> How can we make Judaism and God personally meaningful in  
our lives?

Some people have suggested that we search for the answer in Hasidism, which emphasizes the element of personality and relationship. Some two-hundred years ago, Hasidism too faced a problem of the distance between God and man, and, in response, its founders emphasized the great principle of God's immanence. "The whole world is filled with His glory"; "there is no place which God is not." In other words, we may look for God any place and every place. We therefore might just as well direct our attention to Nature and man, and we will find God there too.

Now that is a valid answer -- but not for most people today. Of course God reveals Himself in Nature; but most of us can't find Him there, precisely because we know too much about the minor details of nature. The moon can no longer inspire us to poetry as it did before we saw the close-up of the surface as we did on television, when a space-ship crashed into it, or when the Russian camera sent back pictures of its terrain. As we tighten our control over Nature, we are less prone to find God in it. Our vision of the heavens has become befuddled by formulae and equations. Our heart and soul and conscience have been displaced by slide-rule and spectroscope and computer. In the contemporary scientific age, we cannot see the forest because of the trees; we are so enamoured of the wonders of God's work, that we forget that God is there. Perhaps, too, that is why we recite only on Shabbat the Psalm that begins Hashamayim mesaprim kevod El, "the heavens declare the glory of God." Only on the day of rest, when we withdraw from our involvement in Nature,

when we have the proper perspective towards man and world, only then can we suddenly realize that these heavens that we have examined so minutely and that we have probed so powerfully, that they themselves declare the glory of God!

The most significant contribution to our problem, telling us how to attain a personal encounter with God in this terribly impersonal world, is offered by Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin.

First, it is important to know how Jewish tradition formulates its faith in God. Briefly, it holds that there are two aspects of man's understanding of the Creator. The first is known to us from the Bible and Jewish History. It is the belief in a personal God, One who reacts to man, who seeks man out, and who wants man to seek Him out. When we are happy, we experience His love and compassion and call him "Father"; when He punishes us, we detect the qualities of severity and justice and call him our "Judge." This belief in God as possessing personality is a fundamental of Judaism. But God's existence is not exhausted by His relationship with man. In fact it is not exhausted by "relationship" at all! God is also beyond man, beyond all the universe. In His Essence, His infinity, God is totally unknowable, even nameless. As Essence, or Ein Sof, God is unconcerned with the world, which is too trivial to interest Him. In His absoluteness, the Kabbalists taught, the world does not even exist for Him. In this respect God is the "great mystery," and man must forever despair of being able to understand this mystery of God.

God, then, is both personal and trans-personal, both related to man and totally unconcerned with him. Granting that all analogies are at best faulty, the best simile is that of the relation of a good but

limited student to a brilliant, world-renowned teacher. The teacher pays attention to the student, answers his questions, offers him instruction, and relates to him in many ways. But the teacher's interests are far beyond the student: intellectual, personal, cultural, social. The student cannot even begin to imagine how far and wide the mind and the intellect of the teacher range. He is unaware even of the areas of interest in which the teacher distinguishes himself. For the student, this teacher is both personal and trans-personal, both related and utterly separate.

Multiply that analogy a million-fold, and we may have some idea of this dual nature of the relationship between God and man. God is infinitely personal, closer to man than his own mother and father -- and yet infinitely absolute, terribly distant and incomprehensible. God is related and withdrawn, involved and aloof, exceedingly close and immensely far.

What does this mean for man? If he succeeds in feeling God's closeness, in -- as it were -- getting God to be close to him, to be personal with him, then his life is fulfilled, it has purpose, and man achieves happiness.

But if man lives so that his God is far away, impersonal, and aloof, then man despairs, he shrivels in cosmic loneliness and universal solitude. Man cannot survive the terror of God's remoteness. If God is not alive for man, then man must die.

The stakes, then, are monumental. Life or death, meaningfulness or aimlessness, fulfillment or frustration, all depend on whether God is personal or impersonal, related or absolute.

What can we do about it? Can we, indeed, do anything about it?

The answer of R. Hayyim is: yes, we certainly can. Whether God is personal or impersonal to us -- depends upon us! If we are personal to Him, He will be personal to us. Whether God concerns himself with us or ignores us depends on whether we concern ourselves with Him or ignore Him.

But how can man become personal with God? All of Judaism, all of Torah and Mitzvot, is the answer to this question. Judaism, in its totality, is a way in which man makes the great gesture of turning his own personality and humanity to God. The purpose of all Judaism is to make God personal by making of man a human, a person, a "mentsch." If we are just machines, who devour the raw products of experience and disgorge jobs and profits and pleasures and waste, then God has nothing to do with us; He turns us over to the giant, cold, ruthless machine called Nature and its impersonal and inexorable laws. If we are men -- human, warm, concerned with God, -- then He emerges from His infinitely mysterious depths and turns to us. The degree to which God emerges from His absoluteness into warm, life-giving personality, depends squarely upon man and his exercise of his spiritual personality. The greatest blessing is: yisa ha-Shem panav elekha "may the Lord turn His face unto thee," may God turn to you and emerge into a personal relationship with you. It is this nesiat panim, "the turning of the face," which is the direct opposite of hester panim, "the hiding of the face." It is this richness of divine personality that is implied in the Yiddish "Gottenyu," a word that is untranslatable.

A truly observant Jew knows that his God is Elokim Hayyim, "a living God." In the Psalms, David tells us: Ha-shem tzilkha al yad

Yeminekha, "the Lord is thy shadow on thy right hand." ~~A sage of~~ The Midrash on

Psalms

~~two centuries ago~~ comments: a shadow follows the body -- when the hand is raised, so does the shadow rise, and when the hand is lowered, so does the shadow descend. So is the relation of God with man: the way man acts to God, is the way God acts to man -- just like his shadow!

God lives for man, only as man lives for God. If God is to be alive for us, we must get personal with, and be alive and alert to Him.

Man cannot simply sit back, and challenge God and Judaism, the Rabbi and the synagogue, to make God real for him. God will not be brought out of His mysterious aloofness by arguments or logic, by science or philosophy, even by sermons or lectures or articles. There is only one way out of the dilemma for the modern Jew: he must make the first gesture to God. He must make this gesture of personality by Torah, for by studying Torah he shows that he takes the words of God seriously. He must do so ~~through~~ prayer -- addressing God feelingly, directly, imploring Him to descend out of His mysterious depths to a relationship with man. He must do so through the Mitzvot, be performing the will of God, for actions speak louder than words. When the Jew or Jewess kindles the Sabbath candles, it is a way of showing our hearts and opening our souls and getting personal with God; it is then that we may say: Shalom Alekhem malakhei ha-sharet, we welcome and greet the angels of God, the close presence of God. When we don the Tallit, we feel that we have excluded all the world and its noises, the inquisitive gaze of even our closest neighbors, and we are alone, communing with God. When we lay the Tefillin, we bind ourselves, the power of our arms and the wisdom of our heads, to Almighty God; and the response, as the Talmud teaches, is that God too, as it were,

lays Tefillin!

All we have been saying has already been said, in capsule form, in a crucial passage in today's Sidra, which speaks of the first revelation by God to Moses. In the famous incident of the burning bush, Moses is attracted by the strange phenomenon of the bush which is aflame and yet not consumed. This burning bush, I suggest, is a symbol of God's paradoxical relationship with man. On the one hand the flame is attached to the bush -- ha-sneh bo'er ba-esh, "the bush is burning in fire." On the other hand, the flame is separated from the bush -- ve'ha-sneh einenu ukal, "and the bush is not consumed." What a strange relationship! Attached, yet separate; close, yet far. It is indeed a symbol of the mystery of God's relation with the world and with man.

Moses is, of course, fascinated by this marvelous sight. Let me approach it, he says, and let me gaze at ha-mareh ha-gadol ha-zeh, this great scene. At that moment the voice of God issues from the burning bush -- the symbol of His relationship with the world -- and calls out to Moses: al tikrav halom: do not come any closer, remove your shoes for you are on hallowed ground. Remember that you are only a mortal and that, therefore, no matter how great you are, you are still limited. Suffice it for you to know of Me that Anokhi Elokei avikha, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of <sup>2</sup>Ya'acob." I am the God who has been known to all your ancestors since Abraham. Forget your theological fascination. Hold it in abeyance.

Moses acknowledges the superior wisdom of his Creator: Va-yaster Moseh panav ki yarei me'habit el ha-Elokim, "and Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God." He recognized that because of his human limitations he must not probe too deeply into this marvelous



mystery of God's dual relationship with the world. There is such a thing as getting too personal with God....

And so God tells Moses: Forget for a while your subjective experience of God, and your theological knowledge and curiosity, Right now there is work to be done -- Godly work! It is more important to carry out My will than to probe My essence. Ra'oh ra'iti et ani ani -- yadati et makhovav... I have seen the oppression and persecution of My people, I know its pain. When people are oppressed and in anguish, when there is suffering and slavery, then there is too much to do on behalf of God to spend your time and efforts wondering about Him.

Yet Moses remained perplexed. I understand my limitations; yet may I not know something about You? After all, all my people will ask the same question: Mah Shemo "What is His Name"? They will want to know something about You.

And the answer that comes from God is: Tell them that I am Ehyeh asher Ehyeh, "I am what I am", or "I will be what I shall be." Generally the meaning is that in essence God is beyond all human thought and conception, and despite all of man's philosophizing he remains transcendent to man's thinking. Yet there is a Midrash which interprets this three-word Name of God in a manner that is of the utmost importance, and that affirms what we have been saying. What does Ehyeh asher Ehyeh mean? The Midrash answers: Ke'shem ashe'ata hoveh imi, kakh ani hoveh imakh -- what you will be with me, I will be with you! As you act toward Me, I will act towards you!

This is the answer of Judaism: if we want God to be close to us, we must first get ourselves close to Him. If we want God to be personal with us, we must get personal with Him.

That indeed is the overarching purpose of Judaism, its prayer, its laws, its ways of life, its study of Torah.

God is not dead for us unless we are first dead to Him. He is very much alive to those who are alive to Him. As we will be to Him, so will He be to us.

May God be with us.

And may we be with Him.