

G-d Is Alive

A Jewish Reaction to a Recent Theological Controversy

By NORMAN LAMM

ORTHODOX JEWS have generally taken a detached and unalarmed view towards the successive fads and fashions in contemporary *apikorsuth*. But when such movements are sponsored by theologians, and are widely discussed in the daily press and in weekly news magazines, it is important to understand them and evaluate them in the light of the sacred sources of the Jewish tradition.

A number of Christian theologians, climaxing a development that has been some years in the making in their circles, have put forth their ideas in a manner as shocking as it is honest, and as scandalous as it is forthright. Instead of clothing their atheism in artificial, long-winded, technical terminology, they have accepted the slogan first coined by a German philosopher of the last century: "G-d is dead." The very blasphemousness of this ^{2x} ~~im~~-pression explains why it makes such good copy for the pseudo-sophisticated weeklies, and tempts young professors of theology to break out of the stifling atmosphere of the ivory towers and into a breathtaking sen-

sationalism. These theologians have made so much noise with their smart slogan that nowadays one expects to look for news of theology not in the Religion section of the press, but in the Obituary columns.

Their criticism of the "old-fashioned religion"—especially if we seek to apply it to Judaism—is crude caricature, almost vulgar in its insinuations. They have set up a straw man and now knock it down. No intelligent Jew ever thought of G-d as a man with a long white beard who lives in a castle beyond the sun. No half-sophisticated human being who believed in G-d ever imagined Him as orbiting the globe in a space ship, somewhere out there.

Any imputation of such primitive concepts to religious folk of ages past is merely a species of intellectual dishonesty.

WHAT do these theologians mean by their intemperate slogan? I believe they are saying three things.

First, they are preaching atheism, pure and simple. Second, they are

asserting a form of deism. That is, they reject the idea of divine personality. They believe in a deity, but one who has no relations with man; he is conceived as an immanent principle, an impersonal power. A deity of this kind cannot reveal himself to man, nor can man pray to him. He is caught up within the natural world. He is not supernatural.

Of course, contrary to what we are being told about its novelty, this slogan is really old-hat. Atheism and deism have long histories, as long as monotheism itself. Both are equally inimical to and obnoxious in the eyes of Judaism, for they deny everything in Torah from "In the beginning G-d created" to the end of the Chumosh, that G-d revealed Himself "in the eyes of all Israel." Neither Creation nor Revelation make sense to an atheist or to a deist.

For whatever such information is worth, and for whatever perverse consolation it may offer, let it be known that this intellectual dishonesty of preaching a "religion" which no

longer accepts a personal G-d was already advocated several decades ago by a group of Jews in New York; and that far from signifying the "death of G-d," *kaveyochol*, it commenced for them their own slow spiritual strangulation. If the new breed of Christian theologians believe that they are original innovators when they speak of a "religionless Christianity," they are in error; they have been anticipated in the Jewish community by the Reconstructionists when the latter proposed "Judaism as a Civilization" and "naturalistic religion" in which it was taught that one can be "Jewish" even though he clearly denies the existence of G-d as Judaism has taught it throughout the centuries. The consequences of this kind of belief, now exposed for all the world to see, are exemplified by a Reform clergyman who openly preaches agnosticism or atheism, deletes every mention of G-d from his service, even from the Shema—and yet is accepted as a bona fide member of a non-orthodox ministerial association!

THE REAL QUESTION

HOWEVER, there is a third meaning of interpretation of the "G-d is dead" slogan that does deserve to be taken seriously by believing Jews. Here there is no denial of theism, the belief in the existence of a personal G-d. However, it seeks to understand the profound sense of loss, by man, of the experience of G-d in modern life. Why, this interpretation asks, does man no longer encounter G-d as personally and as intimately as he once used to?

The question is a real one, and it will not do for us merely to dismiss it with contempt. For some reason, modern society and modern life are such that we usually fail to establish dialogue with G-d, we fail to feel Him as deeply, for instance, as our grandparents did. Our inferior Jewish education is no answer to or explanation of the problem. A familiar phenomenon of former days was the unlettered old lady who could barely read her prayers and certainly could

not understand them, but nevertheless was moved by them to a profound religious experience with her Maker. Prayer was a moving experience, and it was not out of the ordinary to see a tear shed even by one who was intellectually underdeveloped. Today even some of our children are more literate in Judaism than were some of our forebears. Yet seldom does one notice a tear in our synagogues, except on the occasion, Heaven forbid, of personal disaster. What has happened to our lives? Why has G-d, who is alive forever, seemingly abandoned so many of us?

The problem, then, is not G-d, but man. What does Judaism have to say to this very real challenge? I suggest three answers.

FIRST, we should not expect to have a *sustained*, intimate relationship with G-d, constantly and uninterruptedly. Such expectations are too high if we demand of ourselves that this personal experience, this intimate relationship with G-d, be constant and continuous. Man, finite and mortal, cannot maintain uninterruptedly such a relationship with G-d, infinite and eternal. Our great mystics spoke of the phenomenon of *rotzo ve-shov*: a principle of alternation; the deep and profound communion with G-d exists for a short while, and then suddenly man's spirit recoils and he is possessed by a feeling of emptiness and distance and remoteness, only to reestablish contact once again. This is revealed in the very structure of our benedictions. We address G-d intimately, in the second person: "Blessed are Thou . . ." and then, suddenly, we revert to speaking not *to* but *about* G-d, in the third person: "who has sanctified us with His command-

ments . . .," *asher kid'shonu* and not *asher kidashtonu*. What we are taught, therefore, is that we ought to strain ourselves to experience the presence of G-d, especially in prayer, but that we cannot expect to remain on that lofty level in a sustained fashion. Inevitably we must revert to what the teachers of Chasidism called "the periods of *Katnuth*," of diminished spirituality.

The establishment of contact with G-d does not come to us naturally; it demands constant effort and initiative of us, even if we know that we often fail. The failure, in fact, is part of the experience.

Secondly, this estrangement from G-d is a part of G-d's own plan, the inevitable consequence of breach of faith with Him. Man is endowed by his Maker with the freedom to turn *to* Him or away *from* Him. The climax of the *Tochachah*, that 1st of dire Biblical punishments we read twice a year, is: "And I shall hide My face from thee." The Torah enumerates the many disasters to which Israel will be subject, the worst of which is: that G-d will hide His face from us. He will abandon us to the impersonal and inexorable forces of nature and history. *Hester Ponim*, "the Hiding of the Face," is the inaccessibility of G-d to man who searches for Him. It means that man will find it much more difficult to contact his Creator. The punishment of *Hester Ponim* is national-historical in nature; it may last for a period of centuries. Of course, individuals, with but one life to lead, are often impatient and interpret this inaccessibility as the "absence" of G-d. But one must take the long view. The difficulty experienced in achieving the genuine inner religious life is in large measure

the consequence of abandonment of G-d when it was much easier to be religious. Individual people, born, raised, and dying in this long and tragic period of alienation from G-d, this era of *Hester Ponim*, are apt to conclude that G-d was never accessible, perhaps that He never was. They fail to appreciate that G-d is concealing his Presence. The Besht, founder of Chasidism, taught: the Biblical expression is, *V'onochi haster astir ponay*—a repetition of the word “hiding” in the expression “and I will hide My face from thee.” Even the very act of “hiding” will be hidden from man! Not only will man find G-d unavailable, but he will even find the concept of G-d’s inaccessibility to be inscrutable.

THE third explanation is that the alienation from G-d need not necessarily be the result of Sin, as a subsequent punishment of “the hiding of the face,” but may simply be a reflection of the quality of the times in which we live. There are ages when it is easier to be religious, and ages when it is more difficult. Naturally, greater virtue accrues to one born in the Twentieth Century and who is devout, than to one born in the Tenth

Century who remains religious. Ours is an age of great complexity. We live in a society of science and technology in which man has been granted vast new powers. Most of the civilized world is, in effect, one large urban sprawl. In a large city, it is difficult to recapture the primitive sense of immediacy which is so important for a true religious experience. It is difficult not only to be religious, but to be truly religious in the sense of a deep, personal awareness of the presence of G-d.

There are times when the Divine Presence is withheld because of sin, and then we call it *Hester Ponim*. But there are times when the absence of the experience of G-d’s immediacy is a result of the nature of the times. Some periods of history are such that the reason for the absence of G-d is economic—too much affluence—or political or social or, as in our own times, a combination of all these and the cultural-scientific element. Whether our age is the one or the other is a matter of conjecture. But the fact remains that the loss of the awareness of G-d’s presence is neither unprecedented nor unanticipated. Certainly, then, the problem is: How can man keep alive; and not, Heaven forbid: Is G-d alive?

IN SEARCH OF NEARNESS

THE question, is: what can we do about it? How can man, in this 20th Century, once again become alive to his Creator? How can we rediscover our relationship with G-d and experience His nearness? How may we overcome this cosmic estrangement?

It must first of all be clear that,

important as subjective 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 experi-

ence. 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 G-d the following words: *Halevay othi ozovu v'eth torathi shomoru*, "Would that they abandon Me so long as they observe My Torah!" G-d is willing that He Himself be forgotten provided that His will, His Torah, be carried out. It is more important to *be* G-dly, than to *believe* in G-d.

Yet, having said this, it would be a mistake to assume that the matter ends here, that inner religious experience is of no concern to us. The Jewish heart and soul still crave the loving attention of "Gottenyu." How, then, can we achieve in our times the reconciliation between G-d and man, when the two have moved ever farther apart? How can we make Judaism and G-d personally meaningful in our lives?

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

Now, that is a valid answer—but not for most people today. Of course G-d

reveals Himself in Nature; but most of us cannot 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 television close-ups of the surface, 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 G-d in it. Our vision of the heavens has become befuddled by formulae and equations. Our primal reaction to the wonders of the world has been blunted by slide-rule and spectroscope and computer. What we have gained in analytic knowledge we have lost in the responsiveness of the whole man. In the contemporary scientific age, we cannot see the forest because of the trees; we are so enamored of the wonders of G-d's work, that we forget that G-d is there. Perhaps, too that is why we recite only on the Sabbath the Psalm that begins *Ha-shamayim mesaprim kevod kel*—"the heavens declare the glory of G-d." Only on the day of rest, when we withdraw from our involvement in Nature, when we attain the proper perspective towards man and world, do 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 G-d!

THE MOST significant contribution to our problem, telling us how to attain a personal encounter with G-d in this terribly impersonal world, is offered by Rabbi Chayyim of Volozhin.

In viewing his approach, it is important to know how Jewish tradition formulates its faith in G-d. Briefly,

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this 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 G-d, 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 G-d as possessing personality is a fundamental of Judaism.

At the same time, the great sages of Judaism, in both the Kabbalistic and philosophic traditions, have taught that G-d is also more than personal. It is true that G-d relates to us personally; but G-d's existence is not exhausted by His relationship with man. In fact it is not exhausted by "relationship" at all! G-d is also beyond man, beyond all the universe. In His Essence, His infinity, G-d is totally unknowable, even nameless. In His absoluteness, the Kabbalists taught, the world does not even exist for Him. In this respect G-d is the "great mystery," and man must forever despair of being able to understand Him.

G-d, 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 G-d and man. G-d is infinitely personal, closer to man than his own mother and father—and yet infinitely absolute, terribly distant and incomprehensible. G-d is related and withdrawn, involved and aloof, exceedingly close and immensely remote.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

WHAT does this mean for man?

If he succeeds in feeling G-d's closeness, in—as it were—getting G-d 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 ⁵⁰ to that his G-d is distant, impersonal and aloof, then man despairs, he shrivels in cosmic loneliness and universal solitude.

Man cannot survive the terror of G-d's remoteness. If G-d 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 G-d is personal or impersonal, related or absolute.

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

The answer of Rabbi Chayyim of Volozhin is: Yes, we certainly can. Whether G-d is personal or impersonal to us—depends upon us! If we are personal to Him, He will be personal to us. Whether G-d 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 G-d? All of Judaism, all of Torah and Mitzvot is the answer to this question. Judaism, in its totality, is the way in which man makes the great gesture of turning his own personality and humanity to G-d. The purpose of all Judaism is to make G-d personal by making of man a human, a person, a "mentsh." If we are just machines, who devour the raw products of experience and disgorge jobs and profits and pleasures and waste, then G-d has nothing to do with us; He turns us over to the giant, cold, ruthless machine called Nature and its impersonal laws. If we are men—human, warm, concerned with G-d—then He emerges from His infinitely mysterious depths and turns to us. The degree to which G-d 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 ponov elecha*—"May the Lord turn His face unto thee," may G-d turn to you and merge into a personal relationship with you. It is this *n'siath ponim*, "the turning of the face," which is the direct opposite of *hester ponim*, "the hiding of the face." It is this richness of Divine personality that is implied in the Yiddish "Gottenyu," a word that is untranslatable because

of the wealth of its spiritual and psychological implications.

A TRULY OBSERVANT JEW knows that his G-d is *Elokim Chayyim*, "a living G-d." In the Psalms David tells us: *Ha-shem tzilcha al yad yeminecha*, "The Lord is thy shadow on thy right hand." A sage of two centuries ago comments: As 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 G-d with man: the way man acts to G-d, is the way G-d acts to man—just like his shadow!

G-d lives for man, only as man lives for G-d. If G-d 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 G-d and Judaism, the Rabbi and the synagogue, to make G-d real for him. G-d 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 G-d. He must make this gesture of personality by *Torah*, for by studying *Torah* he shows that he takes the words of G-d seriously. He must do so through *prayer*—addressing G-d feelingly, directly, imploring Him to descend out of His mysterious depths to a relationship with man. He must do so through the *Mitzvot*, by performing the will of G-d, for actions speak louder than words. The "aliveness" of G-d is reciprocal to that of man.

This view of the Divine-human encounter is symbolized, I believe in the first revelation by G-d to Moses. Moses

is attracted by the strange phenomenon of the desert bush which is aflame and yet not consumed. This burning bush is a symbol of G-d's paradoxical relationship with man. On the one hand the flame is attached to the bush—"the bush is burning in fire." On the other hand, the flame is separated from the bush—"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 G-d's relation with the world and with man. Moses is, of course, fascinated by this marvelous sight. Yet the Divine command stops him from approaching the bush. Even Moses is mortal, and hence may not pursue his fascination with this mystery beyond his human limits.

Moses acknowledges the superior wisdom of his Creator: "and Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at G-d." He recognized that he may not and cannot probe too deeply into this marvelous mystery of G-d's dual relationship with the world. If G-d does not "hide His face," Moses must soon hide his! Furthermore, there is a more compelling task before him than satisfying

his theological curiosity: leading his people out of Egypt. Performing the Divine will takes priority over probing the Divine nature. Moses is satisfied—yet disturbed. What, he asks, if my people will ask the same question: *Mah Shemo* "what is His Name?" They will want to know something about You. The Divine response is, *Eh'yeh asher Eh'yeh*, "I am what I am," or "I will be what I shall be." The Midrash explains this as: "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 G-d to be close to us, we must first get ourselves close to Him. If we want G-d to be personal with us, we must get personal with Him.

That indeed is the over-arching purpose of Judaism—its prayer, its laws, its way of life, its study of Torah.

G-d 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.

He