

American Jewish Thought Since 1934:

WRITINGS ON IDENTITY, ENGAGEMENT AND BELIEF

Edited by Michael Marmor and David Ellenson

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FROM THE INTRODUCTION

The year 1934 saw the publication of Mordecai Kaplan's *Judaism as a Civilization*, a foundational work of American Jewish thought. Another book published that year was entitled *The Future of Judaism in America*, authored by Eugene Kohn, a colleague of Kaplan's. A sentence from that forgotten work may serve as a watchword for the present volume:

The conditions under which Judaism must maintain itself, if it is to survive in the modern American environment, are so different from those that have confronted the Jewish people in other times and places that Jews naturally ask themselves what sort of Judaism will emerge as a result of Jewish efforts at adaptation.

Decades of tumult, tragedy, and triumph separate us from this American Jew of 1934, peering with confidence into an uncertain future. His assumptions that the American context demands of Judaism a unique response if it is to adapt and survive, and that the efforts of that response will yield a new Judaism, relate not only to the deployment of institutional resources and the insights of sociological analyses. In order for Judaism to adapt to America, new kinds of thinking are necessary.

GOD

Rebecca Alpert

The most sophisticated use of grammatical construction is the predicate theology of Harold Schulweis. Schulweis wants to take the implications of Mordecai Kaplan's naturalist theology one step further ... A post-Holocaust theology, Schulweis argues, must abandon notions of God as a subject, even one as abstract as a Power or Force. Rather, we must turn the sentence around and put our energies into what he calls predicate theology: doing and being "godly". Making predicates the focus of our theology means rather than saying God is a Power, or God is Love, we should put our energies into acting lovingly and powerfully – "mercy, caring, peace, and justice are godly". We also find godliness in "creativity, truth, compassion" ...

Prepositional theology also leaves room for two other approaches not often considered. The Jewish secularist will be "without" God, and the atheist, "against" God. I consider these positions theological because they take a stance on where God is or is not found. These perspectives truly need to be taken into account, as at least half of those who currently identify as Jewish will find resonance with these views...

Why put so much value into prepositions? To paraphrase the Kotzker rabbi, "God dwells where we let God in." Where people locate themselves in relationship to God is key to our understanding of how God is in the world, and more significant than what or how or who God is (or isn't). Prepositional theology shifts our focus of attention to how words connect, and gives us greater capacity to connect to others and ultimately to God, by whatever name you wish to call him or her or it. ...

As someone who currently identifies as secular, seeing myself as being "without" God is a way for me to remain in the theological conversation. These days, I sometimes also find myself not only "without" but "against" particularly when the Israeli government and its supporters make me so angry that God has become my last resort conversation partner. In the end I lay claim to it all: a prepositional theology of with and without, through and between and sometimes against. I encourage you to figure out which prepositional theologies are right for you.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

...a moment comes like a thunderbolt, in which a flash of the undisclosed rends our dark apathy asunder. It is full of overpowering brilliance, like a point in which all moments of life are focused or a thought which outweighs all thoughts ever conceived of. There is so much light in our cage, in our world, it is as if it were suspended amidst the stars. Apathy turns to splendor unawares. The ineffable has shuddered itself into the soul. It has entered our consciousness like a ray of light passing into a lake. Refraction of that penetrating ray brings about a turning in our mind: We are penetrated by His insight. We cannot think any more as if He were there and we here. He is both there and here. He is not a *being*, but *being in and beyond all beings*.

A tremor seizes our limbs; our nerves are struck, quiver like strings; our whole being bursts into shudders. But then a cry, wrested from our very core, fills the world around us, as if a mountain were suddenly about to place itself in front of us. It is one word: GOD. Not an emotion, a stir within us, but a power, a marvel beyond us, tearing the world apart. The word that means more than universe, more than eternity, holy, holy, holy; we cannot comprehend it. We only know it means infinitely more than we are able to echo. Staggered, embarrassed, we stammer and say: He, who is more than all there is who speaks through the ineffable, whose question is more than our mind can answer; He, to whom our life can be the spelling of an answer...

God cannot be distilled to a well-defined idea. All concepts fade when applied to His essence. To the pious man knowledge of God is not a thought within his grasp, but a form of thinking in which he tries to comprehend all reality.

ISRAEL

Peter Beinart

For most of my life, my reaction to accounts of Palestinian suffering has been rationalization, a search for reasons why the accounts are exaggerated or the suffering self-inflicted. In that respect, I suspect, I'm like many American Jews. But in recent years, ... I have been lowering my defenses and Khaled's cries left me staring in mute horror at my computer screen.

Perhaps it is because my son is Khaled's age. He attends a Jewish school, has an Israeli flag on his wall, and can recount Bible stories testifying to our ancient ties to the land. When he was younger, we thought he would call me *Abba*, the Hebrew word for father. But he couldn't say *Abba*, so he calls me *Baba*, the same name Khaled calls his father.

One day when they're old enough to understand, I'll tell his sister and him how my grandmother made me a Zionist. And one day, if they see a video like this, I'll tell them that unless American Jews help end the occupation that desecrates Israel's founding ideals, this is what Zionism will become, a movement that fails the test of Jewish power. ...

Israel's survival is bound up with its ethical survival. Whether or not Israel's nuclear weapons and antimissile shields can protect it from Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, they will be of no use on the day that hundreds of thousands of Palestinians march, nonviolently, to demand the very "equality of social and political rights" that Israel promises in its declaration of independence. And if American Jewish leaders continue to defend the Israeli government at the expense of Israeli democracy, they may find their own children and grandchildren cheering these protesters on.

I will try to give my son and daughter a sense of the immensity of what they have been given, of the agony that prior generations endured so that Jews could have a state. And I will tell them their duty is to help ensure that ... Jewish sovereignty does not fail. I will tell them, if they see the video of Khaled Jabar calling for his father, that I learned of his story because brave young Israelis chronicled it, Israelis who believe in the promise of Israel's independence declaration, which envisions a nation that pursues "freedom, justice, and peace as envisaged by the Hebrew prophets." I will tell them that that pledge, made when the stench of Jewish death still hung over Europe, and amid a war for Israel's very existence, is their patrimony. If Israel betrays that promise, it will be a stain upon their lives. ...

Ruth Wisse

Palestinian Arabs are hardly blind to the ways they have been exploited in the war against Israel. ... Yet, when it came to ascribing blame for their condition, most Palestinians followed their leaders in reproaching Israel and the Jews rather than the Arab governments that kept them homeless. ... Palestinians ... forged their identity to an unprecedented degree in obsessive opposition to another people. ... The special ingredient of Palestinian nationalism ... is its basis in antagonism to Israel and its usurpation of Jewish symbols, history, and identity. The most important date in the Palestinian calendar is ... May 14, 1948, the day of Israel's founding. Drawing their images from both the destruction of the Temple and the mass murder of the Jews of Europe, Palestinians commemorate the birthday of Israel as their *nakba*, or cataclysm. They refer to the *nakba* as "Palestine's endless Holocaust," describing the flight of Arabs during Israel's War of Independence in terms that imitate Holocaust commemoration. Web sites offer "survivors' testimonies" and allege "mass deportations" ... A Palestinian calendar that offers up the Palestinian story "from before the British mandate and up to today's Apartheid Wall" contains not a single entry that is independent of Israel. ... An *Addams Family* caricature could not do justice to the ghoulish delight this document takes in self-torment, self-punishment, and self-destruction at the hands of demon Israel ...

Predictably, the Law of Return looms on the Palestinian calendar for July 15 (1950) as an act of discrimination against Arabs. Because no Arab country shares Israel's sense of responsibility for its co-religionists, ... Palestinians must interpret [Jewish] solidarity as a crime ...

In an effort to chasten modern Israel [after the 1982 war in Lebanon], the historian David Biale... offered a beguilingly contrarian recital of history, locating "power" in situations of prolonged political dependency and "powerlessness" in situations where Jews ruled themselves. Thus, he considers periods of Jewish sovereignty merely preludes to political defeat ... The function of ... these judgments is to make the Diaspora the preferred condition of Jewish political life because it lacks the anxieties of political self-rule ... [There is] an aversion to any kind of physical heroism or strength. ... But [such] insight ... ignored that premodern Jews ascribed to the Almighty, Lord of the Universe, all the physical prowess that they lacked. ... Lacking such faith in God ..., modern Jews could not claim to be moral unless they themselves intended to supply the missing dimension of power. Otherwise, they were signing up Jews for a suicide pact with every new set of enemies.

SPIRITUALITY

Sheila Weinberg

Judy Chicago has written a wonderful poem/prayer that captures the profound hope that I identify with the divine. Images of creation and liberation fuse in a promise of oneness and peace.

And then all that has divided us will merge

And then compassion will be wedded to power...

...And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old And then all will nourish the young

And then all will cherish life's creatures

And then all will live in harmony with each other and

the Earth And then everywhere will be called Eden once again.

As I look back upon my life from the momentary calm of the rock's shelter, what do I see? I see signs of a presence, footprints in the sand, glimpses of a back, a face, a hand, a moment of risking liberation, a moment of embracing creation. There were times in my life when I was ready to say yes or no in a strong enough voice to make a new boundary. This is how I understand the God of liberation. There were other moments when the truth of my own belonging burst through into the light of awareness. This is how I understand the God of creation. These accumulated moments pass through times of change, fear, loss, uncertainty, and pain. They teach me that I am worthy and responsible. My actions matter. I am part of something greater than myself. I am not alone and am not lost.