

To Be a Jew is To Think Big – The Philosophy of Rabbi Harold M Schulweis

The Problem with God 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" (Isaiah 55:9). ... 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.

... 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." As a result, the questions about prayer, miracles, and revelation that I have dealt with are turned into forced either/or options. Prayer is either a unilateral response from God or a lonely human monologue; miracle is either God's intervention or human invention; revelation is either God's word cast down from above or a soliloquy 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.

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*)

Mishna Brachot 9:1 To cry over the past is to say an empty prayer. If a man's wife is pregnant and he says, "[God] let my wife have a boy!" this is empty prayer [*tfilat shav*]. If he is coming home from a journey and he hears cries of distress in the town and says, "[God] let it not be my house!" this is empty prayer.

Talmud, tractate Avoda Zara, 54b: A pagan philosopher asks a rabbinic elder in Rome: "If your God has no desire for idolatry why does He not abolish it?" The rabbi replies: "If it were something of which the world has no need which was worshipped, God would abolish it. But since people worship the sun, moon, stars and planet, should He destroy the universe on account of fools? The world pursues its natural course (**olam k'minhago noheg**), and as for fools who act wrongly, they will have to render an account" . Suppose a man stole a measure of wheat and went and sowed it in the ground. It would surely be right (**din hu**) that the wheat should not grow. But the world pursues its natural course (**olam k'minhago noheg**). Further, supposing a man has intercourse with his neighbor's wife, it would surely be right (**din hu**) that she should not conceive. But the world pursues its natural course (**olam k'minhago noheg**).

Baruch Ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech Ha-Olam

Pokeach Ivrim -- Opens the eyes of the blind; *Mal-beesh Arumim* -- Wraps the naked;

Mateer Asurim -- Frees the bound; *Zokef K'fu'feem* -- Raises those bent over;

Rokah Ha-Aretz al-Hamayim -- Spreads land over waters;

Sheh-Asa Lee Kol Tzar-kee – Provides all I need; *Ha-May-cheen M'tza'aday Gaver* – Guides our steps;

Ozer Yisrael Big'voorah – Saves Israel with strength; *Oter Yisrael B'tee'far'ah* -- Crowns Israel with glory; *Ha-Noten L'ayef Koach* -- Gives strength to the weary.

Talmud Sotah, 14a "How are we to understand the biblical verse Deuteronomy 13:5: 'After the Lord your God ye shall walk'? Is it possible to walk after the Holy Presence given that God is a devouring fire? It means to walk after His attributes: as He clothes the naked, do thou clothe the naked; as He visits the sick, do thou visit the sick; as He comforts the mourners, do thou also comfort the mourners, as He buries the dead, do thou also bury the dead.

Psalm 146

⁵Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help,

whose hope is in the LORD his God,

⁶maker of heaven and earth,

the sea and all that is in them;

who keeps faith forever;

⁷who secures justice for those who are wronged,

gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets prisoners free;

⁸The LORD restores sight to the blind;

the LORD makes those who are bent stand straight;

the LORD loves the righteous;

⁹The LORD watches over the stranger;

He gives courage to the orphan and widow,

but makes the path of the wicked tortuous.

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