Thinking About Revelation

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Considering God's central role in the Bible and in historical Jewish life, it is well worth considering how we relate to God and how God relates to us. We Jews are notoriously uncomfortable discussing God. We prefer to leave that to Christians, attributing commandments to the Torah—as if a book could command— and attributing values to the Tradition—as though culture were an end in itself. The chasm in Jewish continuity reveals the obvious: books by themselves are not authorities, and traditions are mere repositories unless they transmit significance, holiness, and wisdom. For the sake of Jewish survival, and to make that survival worthwhile, it is time to transcend our discomfort with God.

Any Jewish discussion of God begins, as it must, with revelation—whether and how God reaches out to us. Jewish traditions generally respect God's privacy, choosing to think about God only insofar as God relates to people. What God does when humanity is not looking or involved is God's business, not ours. Neither the Hebrew Bible nor rabbinic literature offer much insight into God's internal nature, focusing primarily on the divine-human dialogue. So it is here, with revelation, that we too shall begin.

I believe that there is a holiness which transcends our world. I believe that this holiness can be appreciated in terms of personality—we recognize that this holiness cares about us and wishes to fashion a partnership with us. Jews call that holiness "God." Immediately, however, I must offer two demurrals. The medieval philosophy, Moses Ben Maimon, the Rambam, correctly points out that language is a human construct, developed to describe human experiences and human emotions. Language, when applied to God, must necessarily fall short of precise description. Any talk about God is an allusion to something that eludes the limits of language. Any presumption to reduce God to the parameters of human thought or human language is absurd.

My second demurral flows from the recognition of the limitations we face in talking about God. Because language reflects distinct human perceptions, I also believe that language is specific to particular cultures and particular times. There is no neutral way to transcend our own historical and intellectual context. Consequently, when we talk about God, even recognizing that we must use language metaphorically, we will still reflect the

dominant intellectual trends of our own age, still embedded in a viewpoint of someone from somewhere during some time.

The same caveat applies for our ancestors. When they describe their experience of holiness, they naturally use the language of their culture and the images of their time. They, therefore, allude to God as a warrior, a king, or a shepherd. In rabbinic literature, God is additionally described as a rabbi, a teacher, and a sage.

Rather than focusing on these terms in a literal sense, which would pervert their ability to communicate anything at all, we must ask ourselves what aspect of holiness they mean to transmit, to symbolize, to embody. When the Torah refers to God as "ish milhamah, a man of war", does it mean to say that God carries a spear, or rather that God is passionate about certain causes, among them freeing oppressed people?

I take it to be self-evident that the second path is truer to the genius of the Torah and the intentions of our ancestors.

Language about God is really metaphoric, and that the Torah's imagery is meant to convey deeper truths about holiness. In what way, then, do we understand the revelation at Mount Sinai? In fact, what do we do with all subsequent Jewish traditions, embedded as they are in words? Do we conclude that they are exclusively the product of human hands and minds, reflecting only their own cultural biases? Are they devoid of any authority or insight for our own age? Does God say nothing to us? No. For Sinai is true—it accurately describes, although still as metaphor, the relationship of the Jewish people to that higher reality we recognize as God.

Something happened in the early stages of our people's history that changed their destiny, and ours, forever. At some point, their awareness of God's presence became so overwhelming that they perceived the world in a new and deeper way. In response to an experienced encounter with the divine, the Jewish responded by committing their communal identity to that divine source. From that time forward, the marriage of the sacred with the ethical, the moral with the ritual, became the central calling of the Jewish people. The Torah represents the attempt of the Jewish people, across a millennium, to encapsulate that experience and its implications in words.

Since the Torah represents the response of the Jews to a heightened experience of God, it is patently impossible and fruitless to argue about whether the Torah is divine or

human. It is inseparably both. Just as a flame can only be viewed by an eye, and just as each eye will see the flame in a slightly different way, so too the light of God requires an active human participation in order to be seen at all. Just as the record of a conversation involves both what is said and what is heard, revelation reflects that mixture of divine expression and human perception. Sinai is *mattan Torah*, the giving of the Torah, as well as kabbalat Torah, the receiving of the Torah. The document itself is the by-product of an interaction which came from both directions.

This understanding of the nature of the Torah carries powerful implications for our own day. In denying that God authored the specific words of the Torah, I do not mean to belittle God. On the contrary, I am asserting that no book, however insightful, can possibly contain the complete and final will of God for humanity. God's fullness and love are dynamic, always requiring new expression and new commitment.

Jewish law, halakhah, represents the continuation of that love affair in history. It carries in itself the sensitivity and insight of the Jewish people for holiness as only something ancient and precious can. Because of that preciousness, it retains an authority for us as well. Jewish law, itself dynamic and developing, is where Jews come together to translate the raw and nonverbal experience of their relationship with God into the concrete words and positions which can, in turn, radiate holiness and purpose back into our lives and our communities.

Jewish law is where we can wrestle to achieve consensus. It is where we can celebrate diversity while also setting the limits necessary for our brit, our covenant, to continue into the future. As with the Torah, it is impossible to say where the human element in halakhah, in Jewish law, stops and where the divine begins. Rather, we can say that halakhah is the attempt of the Jewish people to make the light of God visible in the world. Just as light can only be seen when it bounces off of a physical object, so too holiness can only be shared and encountered when it is embodied within human structures.

Our task as Jews, every day of our lives, is to live in the presence of God and to mediate that presence to the larger world. In the words of the psalmist, "shiviti Adonai lanegdi tamid", we must set God before ourselves always.

A relationship with God, no less than a relationship with a human being, requires an openness and an involvement that it total. No aspect of mind, heart, intellect, or emotion

can remain outside.

Inside, if we commit ourselves to seeking God’s will and to embodying it, we can bring a level of holiness to our own troubled souls, to our families, and to our community.

The task is great, the workers are few, and the Master is waiting.