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# THE ATTENUATION OF GOD IN MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT

Norman Solomon\*

**ABSTRACT:** Critical Bible scholarship reveals much diversity in ancient Israelite notions of God, but whatever the theology, the Bible rarely leaves room for doubt that God is alive, alert, vigorous and righteous; even Job, despite his sense of injustice, does not doubt that ultimately God is just, and is in control of events. Modern times have seen a change of attitude, not simply on account of the apparent injustice in the world, but more fundamentally because the successes of science have made God redundant as an explanation for natural phenomena. Twentieth-century Jewish thinkers such as Mordecai M. Kaplan have sought to replace God by social constructs, while those who retain traditional God-talk range from Heschel, whose “anthropopathic God” shares human emotion, to Eliezer Berkovits (“the hidden God”), and from J. D. Soloveitchik (the God of halakha) to Richard Rubenstein (the non-interventionist God) and David Blumenthal (God as abusing parent). In this paper I shall review some of the main theories, while enquiring whether their proponents have anything in common with ancient and mediaeval believers, or whether they have subverted the older God-language, in some cases attenuating the concept of God to the point of atheism.

## *The Bible and its Aftermath*

Broadly speaking – the dividing lines are not sharp – talk about God has moved (“shifted”) through three phases, or models (“paradigms”):

- In the *ancient world* the Israelite claim that there was One, supreme God, was essentially a *denial*; it meant that human affairs were *not* controlled by several powerful, conflicting superhuman agencies.
- *Medieval* Jews, Christians and Muslims all agreed that there was only one supreme Power; discussion was dominated by the practical question of how to relate to this One Being, and the theoretical question of how to accommodate his undoubted existence within some rational scheme.
- *Contemporary* thinkers, by contrast, are concerned neither with demonstrating the superiority of the One God, nor with proving his existence, but by attempts to make sense of the “God-concept”; discourse revolves around the question of what, if anything, do people *mean* when they use the word “god.”

Critical Bible scholarship reveals much diversity in ancient Israelite notions of God. Sometimes, for instance Psalm 82, the Bible portrays God as the *greatest* and most just of the gods; elsewhere, he is the *only* God. The theology varies, but the Bible rarely leaves room for doubt that God is *alive, alert, in control of events, righteous and caring*. Even Job, despite his sense of injustice, does not doubt that ultimately God is both all-powerful and just, if inscrutable; Kohelet is perhaps more sceptical.

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Jews in Late Antiquity, like Greeks reading Hesiod and Homer, were worried by the attribution to God (or gods) of human characteristics, especially those commonly regarded as vices, such as anger and partiality; surely a supreme Creator ought to be beyond such things, perfect and unchangeable (since, as Plato argued, a perfect being could only change for the worse). The Jewish philosophers Aristobulus and Philo, followed by the compilers of Aramaic Targumim, found a line of escape by interpreting anthropomorphic language as metaphor. Some of the Rabbis went along with this but others, maybe the same ones at different times, basked in the plurality of images. Why, they asked, did God open the Ten Commandments with the declaration, “I am the Lord your God”? Surely, his identity was evident to all? But:

Since he revealed himself to them at the Red Sea as a mighty man of war, as it is said, “The Lord is a warrior, the Lord is his name” (Ex. 15:3); than as an elder, replete with mercy, as it is said, “They beheld the God of Israel, and beneath his feet was a pavement of sapphire” (Daniel 7:9-10) ... so, to allow no pretext to the nations to say “There are two powers,” (he declared) “I am the Lord your God; it is I who am in sea and on dry land, in the past and the future, in this world and the next” (*Mekhilta r’ Rabbi Ishmael: Hachodesh* 5 on Ex. 20:2)

Not satisfied with the plurality of biblical images of God, they generated more, casting God in the image of themselves; R. Ḥana bar Bizna in the name of R. Simon the Pious says that God wears *tefillin* (*bBer* 7a), Rabbi Yoḥanan that he stands like a precentor in prayer (*bRH* 17). Howard Wettstein has aptly dubbed this “hyper-anthropomorphic.”<sup>1</sup>

The revival of philosophy in the Middle Ages reignited debate. Maimonides, an extreme opponent of biblical literalism, adopted the Neoplatonic *via negativa*.<sup>2</sup> Nothing could be asserted of God; you gained knowledge of him only by denying attributes so that, for instance, saying “God is great,” was essentially to deny that he was small. Moreover, anyone who attributed material characteristics to God was not only mistaken, but an atheist; what he believed in as God was not God, but a material object (*Mishneh Torah: Teshuva* 3:7; *Guide* 1:60). Kabbalists, on the other hand, insisted that biblical talk of God was literal, though with reference to a profounder form of reality (whatever that means); but even they eventually had to come to terms with the apophatic tradition, and conceded that though the *Shekhina* – identified by Naḥmanides (on Genesis 46:1) with God – might be spoken of in terms of the *sefirot*, corresponding to parts of the (male) body, the אין סוף (Infinite) itself remains beyond the bounds of language.

There were always problems. You might declare that God was just and all-powerful and that he favoured the people of Israel, but this was hard to square with apparent injustice and the current lowly state of the “chosen people.” Also, the relationship with whatever science was known to the Sages was not always comfortable; they were occasionally forced into a defensive position, for instance with regard to miracles:

<sup>1</sup> Howard K. Wettstein, *The Significance of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 14, *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius formulates apophatic theology in *Peri mustikes theologias* (“On Mystical theology”). “Mystical” here means “hidden,” rather than (as later) a private experience of transcending one’s self. Maimonides’ principle source for his concept of emanation would have been the philosopher Alfarabi. David Gillis has recently explored Maimonides’ interpretation of the chain of being in *Reading Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2014).

אמר ר' יונתן תנאין היתנה הקדוש ברוך הוא עם הים שיקרע לפני ישראל ה"ה וישב הים לפנות בקר לאיתנו (שמות יד כז) לתנאו [בראשית רבה (תאודור-אלבק) פרשת בראשית פרשה ה]  
 God made a condition with the sea that it should part before Israel, as it is written (Exodus 14:27) towards morning, the returned according to its condition.<sup>3</sup>

We do not know whether people abandoned or even questioned belief in God in consequence of such challenges, often articulated by pagan philosophers;<sup>4</sup> our records were compiled by believers, rendering doubters largely invisible. However, human cruelty and natural disaster persisted, science progressed, and the problems became ever more acute. In the course of the twentieth century several new Jewish theologies emerged, all of which were shaped to some extent in the light of these persistent problems. These are the problems which led the three seminal 20th-century Jewish thinkers about whom I shall speak to water down the traditional view of God as *alive, alert, in control of events, righteous and caring*.

Let me clarify what I mean by “watering down” or “attenuation.” When the Bible, or other pre-moderns, speak of God as “alive, alert, in control of events, righteous and caring,” they convey the sense of a Presence whose Will provides a satisfactory explanation for what we observe around us and for what happens to us in daily life, who exercises that Will with justice and mercy, who has guided our history and revealed how we should conduct our lives, and who responds actively to those of our appeals he deems worthy. The thinkers I discuss, even if they continued to use traditional language about God, effectively abandoned that sense.

It is sometimes suggested that the fact that Jews in modern times talk of God in ways different from their forbears is a consequence of the Holocaust. But this is not correct. Reflection on the Holocaust certainly led thinkers such as Ignaz Maybaum, Eliezer Berkovits, Emil Fackenheim, Richard Rubenstein and others to formulate theologies focusing on that event. However, far more important in re-evaluating the God idea have been the rise of modern science as explanatory hypothesis for events, scientific and historical challenges to traditional truth-claims, the psychology of belief, and developments in the philosophy of language.

*Ever since Cain killed Abel there has been apparent injustice in the world; Newton, Darwin, archaeology, Freud and Wittgenstein are new.*

### *Modern Jews on God*

My three mid-twentieth examples cover the main trends of Ashkenazic thinking evident since the eighteenth century. Kaplan exemplifies Mendelssohnian, Enlightenment style thought; Heschel is heir to the world of Hasidism; Soloveitchik is closer to the world of the

<sup>3</sup> Midrash puns here, reading לתנאו ‘according to its condition’ for לאיתנו ‘to its normal state’. I am following Maimonides’ interpretation (*Guide* 2:29). Other readings are possible.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Cicero (106-43 BCE) rejected the belief in miracles (*De Divinatione* II: xxviii); Celsus (late-second century CE) poured scorn on anthropomorphisms. See: R. Joseph Hoffman, *Celsus: On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Lithuanian yeshiva. All three have recast their traditions in line with more recent Western philosophy and science.

### 1. Kaplan

Mordecai M. Kaplan (1881-1983) was strongly influenced by the pragmatists William James (1842-1920) and John Dewey (1859-1952). Dewey, in *Experience and Nature* (1925), critiques what he calls “the philosophic fallacy” – the way that philosophers have reified their accounts of human experience by inventing metaphysical objects, such as substance and form, to account for it; instead, one should simply describe the generic features of human experience, focusing on how they function rather than on their ontology. Kaplan utilizes this concept to great effect in addressing the leading question of *Judaism as a Civilization*, first published in 1934, namely, the appropriate response to what he calls the “present crisis in Judaism,” that is, the failure of American Jews to find meaning in traditional Jewish concepts including that of God.<sup>5</sup>

He rejects Reform (chapters 8 and 9) and Conservative (“Right Wing of Reform,” chapter 9; “Left Wing of Neo-Orthodoxy,” chapter 13) Judaism for their lack of spiritual vigour and Neo-Orthodoxy (chapters 10-12) for its “defiance of reason.” He insists on the *functionality* of the God-idea as the focal object of the religious behaviour of Jews, of Jewish “civilization,” but denies that any specific form of the idea is authoritative, and he argues strongly for the abandonment of supernaturalism.

The “present crisis in Judaism,” he says, has arisen because: “*Before the enlightenment, the religion of the greater part of mankind was based on the same world-outlook as was the religion of the Jews ... the one dominant concern of human beings was their fate in the hereafter*” (italics are Kaplan’s);<sup>6</sup> people generally believed that there was only one way to salvation. Now, however, “We are habituated to the modern emphasis upon improvement of life in this world as the only aim worthy of our endeavours”;<sup>7</sup> Jews are still snubbed, but no longer think the game is worth the candle.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Locke, Rousseau and others have given “rise to the modern conception of religion as based upon human experience and reason” rather than on supernatural revelation,<sup>9</sup> with the result that we have adopted a scientific approach to truth, set human welfare as the criterion of the good, and learned to regard aesthetic experience and creativity as essential to the life of the spirit<sup>10</sup> – all very different from how the earlier Jewish generations saw the world.

In a key passage, in which he challenges both the fact and the logic of supernatural revelation,<sup>11</sup> Kaplan writes:

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<sup>5</sup> Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life*. With a new introductory essay by Arnold Eisen (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994). Originally published in New York by Macmillan in 1934.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., chapter 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 40.

We often fail to grasp the seriousness of the menace to the Jewish heritage involved in the modern ideology because we use the term “traditional conception of God” loosely. If we use it in the sense of the belief in the existence of a supreme being as defined by the most advanced Jewish thinkers in the past, there is nothing in that belief which cannot be made compatible with views held by many modern thinkers of note. But if by the term “traditional conception of God” we mean the specific facts recorded in the Bible about the way God revealed himself and intervened in the affairs of men, then tradition and the modern ideology are irreconcilable.

The chief opposition to the traditional conception of God ... arises from the objective study of history ... [it] is challenged by history, anthropology and psychology.<sup>12</sup>

In his critique of “Modern Orthodoxy” in Chapter 12 Kaplan accuses its advocates of subverting tradition:

Neo-Orthodoxy is not traditional Judaism speaking with its own voice, but rather a reaffirmation of traditional Judaism by spokesmen who are aware that alternatives now exist ... belief in supernaturalism has under these circumstances wider connotations in thought and action than the ancient assumption that God had revealed himself to the Patriarchs and to Israel.<sup>13</sup>

Homing in on S. R. Hirsch he observes, “The choice between complete acceptance of the received tradition as literal truth and complete rejection of it as a tissue of lies is not the only one, and it is the third choice that Hirsch completely ignores.”<sup>14</sup> The result is that Neo-Orthodoxy is highly selective, confining traditional halakha to ritual matters and not, for example, civil law.<sup>15</sup>

Against this background it is interesting to read in chapter 4 of Marc Shapiro’s recent *Changing the Immutable* of the convoluted attempts of contemporary Orthodox to repackage Hirsch as a *haredi* leader.<sup>16</sup>

Concluding his review of traditional ideas on God,<sup>17</sup> Kaplan opts for what he calls the “Functional Method of Interpretation.” He insists on the significance of pragmatics: “*The advantage of utilizing traditional concepts is that they carry with them the accumulated momentum and emotional drive of man’s previous efforts to attain greater spiritual power.*”<sup>18</sup> But though the God-idea is essential, it has not and cannot remain static:

The inevitable conclusion to which we are led by consideration of the evolution of the God-idea in the history of the Jewish people, and of the part played by it in civilization in general, is that *the Jewish civilization cannot survive without the God-idea as an integral part of it, but it is in no need of having any specific formulation of that idea authoritative for all Jews* (italics are Kaplan’s).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>16</sup> Marc B. Shapiro, *Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites Its History* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015), chapter 4, 119-141.

<sup>17</sup> Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, part v, chapters 22-26.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 386.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 394.

Citing William James on functionality he observes:

Words, like institutions, like life itself, are subject to the law of identity in change. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, to retain the greater part of the ancient religious vocabulary, particularly the term "God." As long as we are struggling to express the same fundamental fact about the cosmos that our ancestors designated by the term "God," the fact of its momentousness or holiness, and are endeavouring to achieve the ideals of human life which derive from that momentousness or holiness, we have a right to retain their mode of expression.<sup>20</sup>

If, for instance, we were to understand the idea of God as creator as the medievals did, it would land us in a philosophic *cul de sac*, but "If we proceed by the functional method of interpretation, we can discern in the belief that God created the world an expression of the tendency to identify the creative principle in the world with the manifestation of God."<sup>21</sup>

None of this leave us with any detailed guidance as to how to conduct our lives, and this is apparent from Kaplan's summing up: "The spirituality of the Jewish civilization in its fourth stage ... will consist mainly in the effort to foster knowingly and deliberately the historical tendency of the Jewish religion to progress in the direction of universal truth and social idealism."<sup>22</sup>

Kaplan's demythologizing has something in common with that of the Lutheran Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), whose full demythologizing proposal was not made until 1941 in Nazi Germany. For both Kaplan and Bultmann the God-idea is profoundly significant, but it can hardly be said that Kaplan's God is "alive, alert, in control of events, righteous and caring"; it is we who define God, rather than the reverse.

## 2. Heschel

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) earned his doctorate in 1933 for a thesis on "Hebrew prophetic consciousness," in which he applied Husserl's phenomenological method to biblical material. Later, he criticized phenomenology for its pretension to "impartiality," calling instead for "involvement" in the experience under investigation; like the Protestant Paul Tillich, he defined religion as concern about "ultimate" questions.

In *Man's Quest for God* (1954) and *God in Search of Man* (1956) he interpreted traditional Jewish sources, including those of mysticism and of the Haskidism in which he was nurtured, to exhibit a picture of a living, concerned God in intimate relationship with a fragile but noble humanity. This is in conscious opposition to the "abstraction" of medieval Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides, on whom he had published a biographical monograph in German in 1935, and directed also at Kaplan, whom he felt had in effect abandoned God. In *The Prophets* (1962), an elaboration of his doctoral thesis, he applied similar notions to biblical exposition. He utilized the term "anthropopathy" (used earlier

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 398.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 401.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 405.

by Sigmund Maybaum) to justify speaking of God as having feelings and passions like those of people; in this, he stands in the personalist tradition.

Personalism, as a philosophy, has an ancient pedigree, right back to Protagoras of Abdera who proclaimed, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, that “Man is the Measure of All Things” (DK 8081), but this was overlooked by later philosophers in the excitement of creating ever more complex and all-embracing philosophical systems. So Personalism, as a philosophical trend, had to be reborn in reaction to the abstract metaphysics of Kant, Hegel and their followers, which appeared to undervalue experience as opposed to abstraction and the individual as opposed to the universal. Rooted in the philosophies of German Romantics such as Jacobi (1743-1819) and Schelling (1775-1854) and first named by Schleiermacher (1768-1834),<sup>23</sup> it was fully elaborated by Rudolf Hermann Lotze (1817-81), whose American student, the Protestant, Borden Parker Bowne (1847-1910), introduced it to America with his *Metaphysics* (1882).<sup>24</sup> Heschel’s personalism derives, however, not from Bowne, but from Feuerbach via Buber and Rosenzweig. Since, for personalists, the person is the ultimate explanatory, epistemological, ontological and axiological principle of reality, theologically inclined personalists view God, the ultimate ground of reality, as a Super-Person; reassuringly, this is also how the Bible and the Rabbis usually talk about him.

But how reassuring *is* this? How can it be acceptable to talk about God’s “passions” when it is not acceptable to talk about God’s body? Does Heschel really “believe in God,” in the old-fashioned sense, or is he simply using God-language as a way of stirring people to heroic social action?

In a chapter on The Philosophy of Pathos in *The Prophets*, Heschel blames the ancient Greeks and their Jewish followers for placing God in “an exact rational category” and generally denigrating the emotions. It is hard to see how some Greek connection justifies his decision to abandon philosophical critique. Are we to reject mathematics and biology also, just because the Greeks invented them? This would be as patently absurd as it is “politically incorrect.”

In the prophetic mind there was a dissociation of the human – of any biological function or social dependence – from the nature of God. Since the human mind could never be regarded as divine, there was no danger that the language of pathos would distort the difference between God and man.<sup>25</sup> (Heschel, *Prophets*, II:49-50)

Perhaps this made more sense when people thought that emotions subsisted in some non-material spirit; God was unconstrained by a material body, but could still be said to have emotions. But it is no longer coherent. Emotions arise through bodily processes controlled by hormones; they are only intelligible in terms of the material world in which we live and the bodies we inhabit.

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<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was the first to use the term in *Über der Religion* (1799).

<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), with whom Heschel associated in the Civil Rights movement, studied at Boston University, where Bowne had taught for 30 years, and was influenced by his ideas on the value of the human person.

<sup>25</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2 vols. (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1971), II:49-50. This was originally published in 1962.



Heschel certainly *tries* to tell us how he is using God-language, and to explain why talking of God's passions is not a projection of human qualities on God. "Statements about pathos are not a compromise ... they are *the accommodation of words to higher meaning* ... the religious consciousness experiences a sense of superhuman power rather than a conception of resemblance to man."<sup>26</sup> And again, "The idea of the divine pathos is not a personification of God but an exemplification of divine reality, an illustration or illumination of His concern. It does not represent a substance, but an act or a relationship."<sup>27</sup> Insofar as this is coherent, it is surely an acknowledgement that such language is, after all, metaphorical.

Asserting that you cannot describe God, only praise Him, he waxes ever more lyrical over a passionate God who is known through the way Jews have read their prophets and tradition. In *God in Search of Man*, on the questionable assumption that "Every one of us is bound to have an ultimate object of worship," he claims that "our concern with the question about God is an act of worship."<sup>28</sup> God is an "ontological supposition";<sup>29</sup> our certainty of the "realness of God" is a response to the mystery of the transcendent; it is "not from experience but *from our inability to experience* what is given to our mind that certainty of the realness of God is derived."<sup>30</sup> The whole passage is truly poetic, and many of us will resonate to the experience that Heschel conjures up. But how does it connect with the vocabulary and demands of a specific religious tradition? Granted the reality of such experiences, I still have to ask why Heschel chooses to articulate them in admittedly inadequate language, let alone in specifically Jewish, rabbinic form. Is it a means of encouraging community cohesion, or preserving our heritage? Are we not coming perilously close to Kaplan's interpretation of Judaism as civilization, but with the difference that the supernatural is retained for emotional force?

Kant, in *The Categorical Imperative*, invokes God as the necessary presupposition for ethics. I do not know how to differentiate between an "ontological supposition" and a "necessary presupposition," but Heschel is undoubtedly making a stronger claim than Kant; God is the reality we worship, not a metaphysical entity introduced in consequence of a rational argument. Heschel constantly reminds us that we must act with social responsibility because that is what God demands. This distances God from matters other than ethics, leading us to ask whether he is redundant even there; Jewish atheists indeed take this step, seeing no need of a transcendent entity to justify ethics.

Heschel accords excessive prominence to the prophetic tradition, ignoring the plain fact that most of the Tanakh consists of material that is not expressed in the language of pathos – law, history and wisdom occupy more space than prophetic utterance. Passion most certainly has its place in drawing attention to injustice, and to the unfaithfulness of Israel, but it is a dangerous emotion, and there is no lack in scripture of passages demanding restraint.

No-one should undervalue Heschel's overwhelming empathy with humanity, his passion for justice, and his determination to keep alive the spiritual civilization in which he

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., II:51.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., II:53.

<sup>28</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955), 119.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 117.

was nurtured and which the Nazis sought to destroy; he rightly seeks to distance himself from those to whom theology or halakha is more important than fighting injustice. Is Heschel's God "alive, alert, in control of events, righteous and caring"? Probably not, in the way earlier generations would have understood it; but Heschel wants us to continue talking that way, to motivate us to heroic social action.

### 3. Soloveitchik

Joseph Dov (Joseph Baer) Soloveitchik (1903-1993) was notoriously dismissive of the idea of "Jewish theology," but nevertheless contributed to it richly. His concept of God may be inferred not only from his philosophy of halakha and from the poignant expression of redemption through suffering in the essay *Kol Dodi Dofek*, but more generally from his attitude to prayer and to *teshuvah* (repentance). To Soloveitchik, God is the most real Presence, requiring no demonstration because He is simply – there! Three times a day, as one rises in prayer, one stands in awe at his presence. The divine presence is powerfully experienced through creativity in halakha:

When halakhic man approaches reality, he comes with his Torah, given to him from Sinai, in hand. He orients himself to the world by means of fixed statutes and firm principles ... furnished with rules, judgements, and fundamental principles, [he] draws near the world with an *a priori* relation. To whom may he be compared? To a mathematician who fashions an ideal world and then uses it for the purpose of establishing a relationship between it and the real world ... The essence of the Halakha, which was received from God, consists in creating an ideal world and cognizing the relationship between that ideal world and our concrete environment.... There is no phenomenon ... which the *a priori* Halakha does not approach with its ideal standard ... When Halakhic Man comes across a spring bubbling ... he already possesses a fixed, *a priori* relationship with this real phenomenon ... he desires to coordinate the *a priori* concept with the *a posteriori* phenomenon.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the analogy with mathematics is only a metaphor; from a philosophical point of view, it is very difficult to see how the contingent propositions of halakha can be regarded as *a priori*. But the intention is clear; Soloveitchik wishes to confer on the system of *halakha* precisely the invulnerability to history that he thought was characteristic to logic and the mathematical sciences. He may well have been influenced in this by Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) who, in his seminal *Das Heilige* ("The Holy"), first published in 1917, sought to lay the foundations of a religious *a priori*, distinct from mere feelings. The sense of the numinous, of the *mysterium tremendum* is, for Otto, a supra-rational means of apprehension; it yields knowledge which cannot be attained through the rational faculty. It is an *a priori* category, invulnerable to the charges of social and historical conditioning and relativity levelled by sociologists of religion such as Max Weber to the religious concepts of holiness and transcendence. Soloveitchik, however, rejects Otto's notion of transcendence removed

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<sup>31</sup> J. D. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983), 19-20. "When halakhic man comes across a spring bubbling ..." is reminiscent of Buber's "I consider a tree ..." Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Continuum, 2004), 14.

from reality; holiness is, rather, the constraint (צמצום) of the transcendent within the “real” world through the channel of halakha.<sup>32</sup>

Soloveitchik’s essay קול דודי דופק (*Kol Dodi Dofek*, “It Is the Voice of My Beloved That Knocketh”) originated as an address at Yeshiva University, New York, on Israel Independence Day, 1956, in the run-up to the Suez crisis, with the sufferings of the Holocaust still vivid in Jewish minds, exacerbating fears for the future of the nascent State. Why, asks Soloveitchik, has God allowed evil to reign over his creation? He articulates his response through a distinction between two dimensions of existence, *goral* (גורל, “fate”) and *ye’ud* (יעוד, “destiny”). “The ‘I’ of fate asks a theoretical-metaphysical question regarding evil, and this question has no answer. It is insoluble.”<sup>33</sup> Man is born and dies like an object. However, in the dimension of destiny he “possesses the ability to live like a subject, like a creator, an innovator, who can impress his own individual seal upon his life ... and enter into a creative, active mode of being.”<sup>34</sup>

Reflecting the rabbinic adage that כל דין שדן דין אמת לאמיתו אפילו שעה אחת מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו (“Any judge who decides a case in absolute truth for even a short time is regarded by scripture as a partner of the Holy One, blessed be He, in creation”) (bShab 10a), he continues: “Destiny ... presents [man] with a royal crown, and man becomes transformed into a partner with the Almighty in the act of creation.”<sup>35</sup> “Destiny” may seem very different from the Talmudic notion of partnership with God in truthful judgement, but it is precisely creativity in halakha that Soloveitchik has in mind: “The fundamental question is: ‘What obligation does suffering impose upon man?’ ... the sufferer commits a grave sin if he allows his troubles to go to waste and remain without meaning or purpose.”<sup>36</sup> “God’s acts of *hesed*” flow from His superabundant and generous hand, but demand that we turn His gift into fruitful, creative forces;<sup>37</sup> man must transform “fate into destiny, elevating himself from object to subject, from thing to person.”<sup>38</sup>

Soloveitchik has a strong sense of the workings of divine providence in history, and he presents the establishment of Israel as the “call of the beloved.”<sup>39</sup> “*As a result of the knocks on the door of the maiden, wrapped in mourning, the State of Israel was born*” (italics are Soloveitchik’s).<sup>40</sup> In his ruminations on the two covenants – of Egypt (גורל) and Sinai (יעוד) – he constantly talks of man as in the Presence, and it does not read like a metaphor; the covenants are personal as well as collective.<sup>41</sup>

Can we conclude that Soloveitchik conceives of God as “alive, alert, in control of events, righteous and caring”? Up to a point, yes, but even he has moved away from the naïve conception of God as intervening in daily life in a manner more or less comprehensible in terms of reward and punishment. God’s presence is tangible, at least to those involved in

<sup>32</sup> Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 45.

<sup>33</sup> J. D. Soloveitchik, “Kol Dodi Dofek: It Is the Voice of My Beloved That Knocketh,” trans. Lawrence Kaplan, in *Theological and Halakhic Reflections on the Holocaust*, ed. B. H. Rosenberg and F. Henman (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1992), 54.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. comment on *Song* 5:2 in *ibid.*, 67.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 80-92.

halakhic creativity, and he may be ultimately in control of events, but he exercises that control at a level that makes little sense to the ordinary mortal.

### *Conclusion*

The terms “theist” and “atheist” are surprisingly flexible. Spinoza was condemned as an atheist for more than a century, and Johann Gottlieb Fichte was dismissed from his post at Jena in 1799 on a similar charge, having written: “The living and efficaciously acting moral order is itself God.”<sup>42</sup> Yet the influential German Romantic poet and philosopher Novalis (Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg, 1772–1801) could write: “Fichte’s ego is reason – His God and Spinoza’s God are strikingly similar. God is the pure supersensible world – we are an impure part of it. We conceive God personally, just as we conceive ourselves personally. God is just as personal and individual as we are.”<sup>43</sup> And more famously, he referred to Spinoza as a *gottbetrunkenen Mensch*, “intoxicated with God.”<sup>44</sup> Who is to say that Novalis was wrong?

All three of the thinkers I have discussed continue to use traditional God-language, but none of them conceives of God as “alive, alert, in control of events, righteous and caring” in the straightforward way that was common in earlier times. Kaplan reduces God to a more or less inspiring sociological construct; in rejecting what he calls the “supernatural” he risks a charge of atheism. Heschel is determined to uphold the notion of transcendence; his God cares deeply about social justice, but does not intervene to bring it about. Soloveitchik is closest to tradition, but – like Maimonides before him – stops well short of traditional notions of individual providence. For all three, God (in some sense) is not dead, but having told us what to do expects us to get on with the job and is not in a hurry to lend a helping hand when we mess up.

These three thinkers, though typical, by no means exhaust the range of contemporary Jewish thought, since not only are there overt Jewish atheists,<sup>45</sup> but also, in the *haredi* world, thorough-going Jewish fundamentalists; the spectrum is not dissimilar to that found in other religious communities.

The question of “watering down” the concept of God is only one aspect of the broader question of how we conceive and talk about God. There is also the issue of what *kind* of images we have. In this connection feminist theology assumes significance. Some may think the idea of God as “alive, alert, in control of events, righteous and caring” is excessively male, though in my view that would constitute gender stereotyping; in any case, none of the three to whom I have referred seriously addressed such issues, since

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<sup>42</sup> Johann Gottlieb Fichte, “Ueber den Grund unsers Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung” [On the Ground of Our Belief in a Divine World-Governance] (1798).

<sup>43</sup> Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon*. SUNY series, Intersections: Philosophy and Critical Theory, translated and edited by David W. Wood (Albany, NY.: State University of New York Press, 2007), ProQuest ebrary [internet], accessed 9 June 2015, #1098.

<sup>44</sup> Novalis, “Novalis Schriften [HKA],” in *Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs (Historische-kritische Ausgabe)*, eds. Paul Kluckhohn, Richard Samuel, Gerhard Schulz, and Hans-Joachim Mähl (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1960–2006), IV, 188, and III, no. 562, 651.

<sup>45</sup> The International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism was established in Jerusalem in 1985, and its ideals are expounded in Yaakov Malkin, *Secular Judaism: Faith, Values and Spirituality* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2004).

their creative activity occurred before the full impact of feminism was felt in the Jewish world.

In summary, Kaplan, Heschel and Soloveitchik in their time performed the essential task of theologians; they demonstrated how the faithful might continue using the traditional language of faith, while at the same time they subverted that language to accommodate it to worldviews quite different from those of the creators of the founding documents of the faith.

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