

# On the Commandment to Question

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*The quest for a common spiritual language for Israeli society requires recognizing that questioning God is not a sign of antagonism towards religion, but the peak of Jewish spirituality.*

Underlying the conflict over politics in Israel is an essential conflict of perceptions—a conflict over how to grasp the world we live in, whether through the prism of the sacred, or that of the secular.

These are the two categories into which we divide society, and each is identified with a set of principles, taken to be axiomatic. There are political and social opinions which are held to be naturally secular, and there are opinions which are held to be naturally religious. But these often emerge as caricatures rather than as reflections of authentic secular or religious philosophy.

Because we live in a world of sound bites, real reflection is often overwhelmed by the pressing needs, struggles and anxieties of the day-to-day. This allows the easy-to-digest, “fast food” caricatures of religiosity and secularism to become what the community relates to and understands as true. These simplistic images are not a little bit distorting, and perhaps dangerous as well, and they require examination if we are to forge a shared cultural language—

that is, a common spiritual vocabulary that can serve to unite the overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews. The vocabulary which we seek can be extracted from the expressions and rhythms of contemporary life. What hinders the creation of this language, at least in part, is the mutual distortion and caricaturing which prevent the religious and secular communities from truly communicating with one another.

Not infrequently, denigrating expressions of anti-religious sentiment in the media arise from a severely distorted perception of the intellectual and existential reality of religious thought. Clearly, some of this distortion is self-serving and self-justifying. It comforts Jews who have long since abandoned any sense of deep Jewish content and identity in their lives, allowing them to feel justified, morally correct and even superior in their choices.

However, much of the misperception of religious life emerges from distortion generated by the religious community itself, specifically by voices which misinterpret, distort and project an image of religion which is unfaithful to the sources and the spirit of classical Judaic tradition. Even when this strain of religious belief does ground itself in sources, it is done in a non-dialectical fashion: One source or a group of sources is cited from a particular time and place, and held to express the essence of Jewish thought; other sources from other times and other places which may express very different views are conveniently ignored.

In the discussion below, I have chosen to treat a single, highly charged example of this phenomenon of distortion which comes from non-dialectic use of our sources: The question of man's right to challenge religious principles, which in its most developed form is the right to challenge even God, his activity, conduct and involvement in the world. My analysis will revolve around possible human responses to suffering and evil, and particularly the relationship between those whose response to evil is to question, and those whose response is to offer theological explanations. It is my hope that this effort will succeed in redefining at least this first basic religious issue in a way that reflects a truer spirit of classic Jewish sources. This is the first step in forming a shared spiritual language which has the ability to unite the majority of the Jewish people under the umbrella of the sacred.

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## II

The classic understanding—or rather, misunderstanding—of the relationship between questions and answers in religious life is perhaps best expressed in the old adage, “For the believer, no proof is necessary; for the non-believer, no proof will suffice.” The suggested relationship of questions to answers is similarly expressed in the Israeli vernacular by the not accidental terms *hazara bitshuva* (“return in answer”) and *hazara bish’ela* (“return in question”). In Hebrew idiom, one who returns with “the answer” is one who decides to take up observance of the commandments, to move from the periphery to the center, to become God-involved, to become a religious personality. One who returns with “the question” is understood to be someone who moves from a theocentric world to an anthropocentric world, from living in a religious reality to existing and functioning in a secular reality.

The use of “the question” to express movement away from religiosity towards secularism is obviously not an accidental turn of phrase. Language, and particularly popular idiomatic expression, captures the essence of the thought and rhythms of a society. The mistaken implication is that to question is to move away from a religious mode of thinking and living. To have unwavering answers, on the other hand, is viewed as the epitome of the religious position. Yet on consideration, it becomes apparent that this understanding of the relationship between questions and answers is a caricature of religious truth, and a distortion of the Jewish sources. Indeed, the popular usage of these terms tells the story of a very profound mistake, and one which exerts a powerful negative influence on the possibility of dialogue and shared community in modern Israel.

## III

Let us begin with a question: If the return to Judaism in its classic sense in fact means the return to a deeper, richer, more fulfilling lifestyle, why doesn't everyone do it?

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When I was seventeen or eighteen years old, looking around the world in which my friends and I would one day teach, we thought it was so simple. It was obvious to us that we would be able to find the words, that synthesis of meaning and excitement that would prove irresistible to the secular Jew, and we believed that it was only a matter of time until everyone was engaged in religious practice, observance and study. We have been teaching now for over fifteen years and, somehow, it has not happened. The overwhelming majority of the Jewish people have not returned in answer. Why?

Clearly there is not one simple monolithic answer. Part of the explanation is probably the hedonism of the modern world, which can unquestionably drown out the quiet murmur of the sacred, at least for a while.

But I do not believe this answer exhausts the question. There is something deeper. There is another level of resistance to the message of “return” which prevents at least a significant segment of our people from considering coming back to their roots. The first reason assumes that the listener cannot hear the still, small voice of holiness above the din of modern materialism; the message is fine, the reception is unclear because of static. But the second, deeper approach will suggest that perhaps the flaw lies within the message itself.

R. Abraham Isaac Kook, in his magnum opus *Orot Hakodesh*, suggests that the people of Israel are themselves “a received tradition of Moses from Sinai.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, the Jewish people are, by their very existence, a prism of revelation. Refracted through the collective consciousness and unconsciousness of the Jewish people are the rays of authentic spirituality and divine revelation: “Every spark of scattered life, through all the dimensions and currents of Jewish being, is somehow connected to the source of divine spirit. Every movement in the symphony of Jewish thinking and feeling, no matter how far or how distant it seems to be, is in some sense an expression of the supernatural light within the Jewish spirit. Non-authentic spiritual movement finds no enduring home in the community of Israel.”<sup>2</sup>

One corollary which one finds in R. Kook’s writing is the idea that the community has a built-in barometer for spiritual truth, a built-in litmus test which detects authenticity in spiritual teaching. And from this, one could, perhaps somewhat audaciously, offer the following thesis: If the community is unable to hear the message of a “return in answer,” then the problem may not

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be with the community: Perhaps the message itself is fundamentally flawed. It could well be that the Jewish people reject the contemporary call for religious return because of their inherent spiritual instinct. The intuitive spiritual barometer of the community senses a violation of its basic ethos in the Jewish teaching in its present form.

This violation is, I believe, related to the essence of the language of *hazara bitshuva* and *hazara bish'ela*. It is related to the very implication that if one but returns to God and to religious observance, one will be in a place which supplies answers—all the answers—a place which is beyond the place of *sh'ela*, the place of question. Intuitively, the community understands that this is not true, that questioning is a religious category, perhaps even a religious imperative, and that “returning in question” can, contrary to what has been said so often, be a profoundly religious act: It can be a movement not away from God, but towards God.

#### IV

How do we relate to God? What is our model for approaching the divine? Sometimes we talk to God as Father. Other times we speak to God as Lover: “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.”<sup>3</sup> On some occasions God is Mother, and we seek to return to the divine womb through immersion in the ritual bath. God is *shechina*, the feminine presence, who embraces us and makes us feel safe. And very often, perhaps most often in Jewish literature, God is proclaimed King.

What do we mean when we call God “King”? How does God’s kingship express itself? That God is a lover, present in our lives, embracing us in dark moments is, paradoxically, easier to understand than that God is King. For kingship implies power, it denotes sovereignty. A king is one who decrees and whose decrees are fulfilled. Therefore, in Jewish law, one who violates the decree of the King has violated his essential kingship. Jewish law calls this person a *mored bemalchut*, one who has rebelled against the kingship of God. Yet, can we truly and honestly say God is King in this world? If God is King

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and kingship implies power, the world looks confusing. Because, after all, when we say that God is King, we mean that God has the power to fulfill his will.

What is God's will in Jewish tradition? God is good; one of God's holy names is "the Good One." If God's will is good, if God's essence is good, then God's desire in the world is to make the world a good world—a world of goodness and of joy, a world of fulfillment, without pain or suffering. In fact, R. Moshe Haim Luzzato suggests in *The Way of God* that the fundamental purpose of creation is for God to bestow his goodness.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, even a cursory survey of our own personal reality and the reality of the world yields the conclusion that God seems unable to fulfill his own will. God's kingship, God's power of decree, seems to be lacking or weak. The distended stomachs of hungry children dot the landscape of our world. Harsh physical suffering and cruel torture make up the daily stuff of human existence. And this is before one speaks of the existential torture of lonely people sitting isolated in their rooms, or in their mansions, desperate for embrace and real connection—with themselves, with the world, with some "other" and with God. If God is King, if kingship implies power, and if God is good, then the world should reflect that power, and it should reflect that goodness.

So how can we say that God is King? The Talmud prescribes that a Jew should say one hundred blessings every day.<sup>5</sup> And each one of these blessings must contain within it the expression of God's name and a declaration of his kingship. One hundred times a day the Jew re-expresses God's kingship, and yet—is it true? Is God really King?

God may be Friend, God may be Father and Mother. But adults know that a father or mother can't always protect us. God may be Lover, and yet we understand full well that a lover may suffer with us and sometimes even disappoint us.

But is God King, *sovereign and absolute*? At least at first glance, an honest observer of our reality would be hard-pressed to affirm God as King, at least not King in a way that I can understand, not kingship as meaningful to me. God's power would seem to be too well-hidden in our world to allow for easy declamations of kingship.

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V

Is this question about God's kingship a legitimate one? Is the conclusion we have experienced religiously correct? Or does the religious reader need to stop his reading because such a challenge is heretical? Do we have the right to question? Is questioning a movement away from the divine center towards a periphery which is empty and secular? Or is the act of questioning, even of challenging God's essential kingship, an act of profound religious passion, even an obligation? If we say *hamelech*, the King, we need to know what it means. It must express a reality that is true to our experience, that we understand. If it doesn't, then it is dishonest. And God cannot possibly want dishonest religious language.

The Talmud poses the question: Why were the Men of the Great Assembly, who canonized the prayers recited by the Jewish people, called by that name? What was their greatness? And it responds: "They returned the crown to its glory."<sup>6</sup>

How? The Talmud explains: Moses praises God as "the God who is great, powerful, and awesome."<sup>7</sup> Yet when Jeremiah praises God he mentions only his greatness and power, leaving out any mention of God's awesomeness.<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah had watched the holy Temple go up in flames. He had seen strangers mocking and desecrating the sacred site. He did not see or experience God's awesomeness. For this reason, Jeremiah changed the traditional description of God which had been handed down from Moses, the divinely inspired description of the experience of God's awesomeness. The experience of divine awesomeness was alien to Jeremiah, so that he deleted the word.<sup>9</sup> Later Daniel, who saw strangers enslaving and oppressing the children of Israel, did not witness or experience God's power, and so he similarly altered Moses' formula and praised God's greatness and awesomeness—but not his power.<sup>10</sup>

Jeremiah and Daniel refused to use religious language which they did not understand, which did not express their reality. The Men of the Great Assembly explain that in God's absence, in God's silence, is God's *power* and *awesomeness*. Only in God's apparent silence does the miracle of the Jewish



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people's survival emerge—the miracle which allows the Jewish people to be the representation of God in the world. This is God's very greatness and God's very awesomeness. The theology suggested by the Men of the Great Assembly in their response to Jeremiah and Daniel is beyond the scope of our present discussion. Critically, however, what emerges from the text is that because they were able to experience God's greatness and God's awesomeness, they returned the text to its original form, the form suggested by Moses—God who is great, God who is heroic, God who is awesome.

And then the Talmud asks the most essential question: How did Jeremiah, Daniel and the rabbis have the audacity to do what they did? How did they assume the authority to uproot the decree of Moses? How could they change words which were divinely inspired? The Talmud responds: "Because they knew that God is true, they did not want to be false to him." So they deleted words from a sacred text, rather than express that which was not true to their experience. And, adds the Eleventh-Century commentator Rashi, as if to drive home the point: "God affirms that which is true, and God hates that which is a lie."<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, Rashi's intent here is not an objective lie, but that which is a lie to our experience. To say that God is King when we do not experience God's kingship without deeply questioning and challenging that reality, is essentially to lie. To violate the essential requisite of honesty in religious language is to violate God; God despises the lie. The Talmud gives us the right of silence. It gives us the right not to engage in religious dialogue, in religious expression which does not reflect our deepest truth. But it does not yet give us the right to challenge God.

The Men of the Great Assembly insist on the honesty of religious language. When religious language is unable to express itself in a manner which is true and honest, the prophet becomes silent. Silence is a religious option to be preferred over the lie.

Yet our question goes deeper. Do we have a right to move beyond silence into the realm of actual questioning? May we formulate, and express, a divine challenge? Can I cry out to God and say: Yes, you exist, but are you relevant? Are you a personal God who is just and fair, or are you a God who allows a



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million children to be destroyed in the Holocaust? Are you the God who allowed my mother, at age five, to see babies ripped apart before her and then to have to pick up the pieces and bury them? Are you a God who allows a child, as in Dostoyevski's description, to be torn apart by a hundred dogs in front of his mother—because of the casual whim of the retired officer on the horse? Is there any theology which can justify such agony?

May we scream our question towards God, demanding in all of our human brokenness, an answer? May we ask, is God King? That is the question. Can we, in the face of travesty and suffering, affirm, before the open grave, God's kingship? And is it possible to hurl that challenge while still remaining in the arena of the sacred? What is our response to the open grave? What does our tradition formulate as the words to flow from our lips as we stand before the freshly dug grave?

## VI

The first time I performed a funeral in America, I was twenty-five years old. A couple in their early fifties had finally had their first child. The baby was born prematurely and died two weeks later. At the cemetery I read, for the first time as a rabbi, the text of the Jewish response to the open grave. It reads as follows: "He is the Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice."<sup>12</sup>

When I went home that day, the phrase resounded in my mind and troubled me deeply. What did that sentence mean? Was the Jewish response to quash the question? Did we not have the right before an open grave to shout that it is unfair that babies should die, that it should not be that way? Late that night I pored over the text, trying to understand its deepest, most hidden recesses. Does the text allow us an approach to God in moments of suffering, other than in mere affirmation of divine justice?

Let us re-approach this text, that declares that all God's ways are justice. Is there a hidden echo in it, is there a deeper layer of meaning that can be uncovered by a closer reading?

Who is the speaker? The speaker is Moses, the context is Moses' farewell oration to the Jewish people. In fact, this is not the first but the second time in the biblical text that Moses refers to "God's ways." The first time is when Moses stands before God after the sin of the golden calf, seeking atonement for the Jewish people. And God responds in the affirmative. God is willing to embrace his people once more, despite their deed. But for Moses this is not enough. Moses demands of God, in a cry which resounds throughout the centuries: "God, show me your ways."<sup>13</sup>

What is Moses asking for? What does Moses want from God, above and beyond forgiveness for the Jewish people? With audacity and courage, the rabbis of the Talmud interpret the text: Moses says to God—"The righteous suffer, the wicked prosper."<sup>14</sup> God, your world is not fair. God, do you not know about the widows, do you not know about the orphans? Don't you know about the wells of tears shed by your children every day?

To understand the drama, the impact and the theological force of the text, we need to step back and look at an earlier conversation that takes place between God and Moses at the burning bush, and at a later exchange which is intended to parallel it. There are two dimensions to these conversations which relate to our issue.

First. God says to Moses: I want you to take responsibility for the children of Israel. Initially Moses doesn't even understand that he is talking to God. Then, realizing he is looking in the face of divine revelation, he hides his face, unable to look directly at the face of God. He also tries very hard to refuse God's demand that he take responsibility for the Jewish people.<sup>15</sup> Much later in Exodus, a second conversation, an intended literary return to the first, takes place. In the second conversation, both roles are reversed. This time, it is Moses who says to God: God, you take responsibility for the children of Israel. And God attempts to say no. But Moses insists. If you will not take responsibility, says Moses, erase me from your book. God responds by affirming his love and responsibility for the Jewish people.<sup>16</sup>

Second. In the course of this later interaction, Moses hears God say to him the following words: "Now, let go of me." The rabbis seize on this peculiarity and ask: What does God mean, "Let go of me"? Was Moses holding on

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to God's sleeve? Yes, respond the rabbis, Moses literally seizes the divine garment, looks at God "face to face"<sup>17</sup> and demands an answer to his request to "show me your ways." God, he demands, why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?<sup>18</sup>

Moses is a prophet, the ultimate prophet. Prophecy according to Maimonides is the ultimate level of human perfection.<sup>19</sup> What the text in Exodus suggests is that Moses at this moment is at the apex of his prophecy. Moses has emerged. He is no longer the prophetic novice we meet at the beginning of the book. He is now at the height of his prophetic powers.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, this moment is the zenith of attainable human spiritual enlightenment in the history of the world. In the language of the kabalists, it is "the highest." And at this moment what does Moses choose to do? Does he embrace God with clear theological proofs of divine perfection? Does he, in ecstasy, move to a higher level of meditation? No. At the highest level of human spirituality, Moses poses a question to God. And that question is understood by Jewish consciousness not as a movement away from God but as the quintessential movement towards God. The question becomes the embrace. The question itself, the challenge per se, becomes the most powerful expression of human, Jewish, spirituality.

## VII

Let us return to the text we recite before an open grave: "God's ways are justice."

On one level, Moses, parting with the Jewish people as they are about to enter Canaan without him, is affirming that God's ways are just. His statement is an embrace of the divine, a nullification of the possibility of human understanding. On another level, there resonates challenge and question. Moses, again using the expression "God's ways," echoes his previous usage of the same word: "God, show me your ways"—God, I demand that you explain how your world operates. The dialectic unity of the embrace and the challenge generates the core harmony of the Jewish worldview and way of life.

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We can now turn our attention to the other crucial term, “justice”—the term which the biblical narrative associates with Abraham, the first Jew. Indeed, Abraham is the first Jew, as God says, because “I know that Abraham represents the attribute of justice and that he will transmit justice to his children.”<sup>21</sup> Yet where in the biblical text do we see Abraham associated with the attribute of justice? In only one place: Four verses later, God informs Abraham that he is going to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorra.<sup>22</sup> Abraham does not respond to this by affirming divine justice. Instead, Abraham stands at the potential open grave of thousands of people, albeit wicked people, and says to God: “Will you who are judge of the entire world not do justice?” Abraham challenges God. Abraham questions. Abraham is unable to see suffering and simply affirm divine justice. Abraham demands to understand, demands an answer to his question. Abraham becomes the first Jew because he embodies justice. He manifests justice by challenging God.

The Zohar suggests that Abraham had competition for the job of the first Jew from Noah. According to this tradition, when God stood poised to destroy the world, Noah responded by building an ark; God had commanded him to do it, but God was also waiting to hear Noah’s cry of protest.<sup>23</sup> God was waiting to hear Noah’s question, his challenge of the divine. God was waiting for Noah to oppose the divine because only when a human being opposes apparent injustice, whatever its source may be, even if its source be God, is he truly identifying with the divine. Noah is silent, compliant, obedient, and therefore fails to transmute himself into the person who would be the prototypical Jew. The prophet Isaiah, understanding and bearing witness to this moment, names the devastating flood “the waters of Noah.”<sup>24</sup> Noah is guilty. Noah is culpable, because Noah was silent.

Thus in Moses’ phrase, “[God] is the rock; his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice,” one finds both the embrace and the challenge. Not by accident was this phrase adopted by the Jewish community as the text recited before the open grave. It is in this moment that we embrace God, even as the deepest divinity in our human soul demands that we challenge and that we question. And it is this moment that defines the essence of the Jewish spirit.

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And the theme of this passage is echoed in countless sources in the biblical texts. Jeremiah, Habakuk, Job, David, Malachi, Isaiah—all challenge, all question, all cry out against the injustice which seems to define the world in which we live.<sup>25</sup> All prophets live the dialectic of embrace and challenge. All return to God in question. All are *hozrim bish'ela*—those who return in question.

### VIII

There have always been “believing” Jews for whom the dialectic question of embrace is simply too difficult, and who prefer simple answers to traditional Jewish truths. The text they most often cite is Deuteronomy 31:17-18, where God says: “On that day my anger will burn against them, I will forsake them, I will hide my face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them.” This passage suggests to these religious theorists that suffering is necessarily a result of divine punishment of human misdeeds. And indeed, the text does suggest that there is a possibility of suffering in the world resulting from punishment.

Yet the passage in no way declares that all or even most human suffering can be explained as punishment: The key phrase is “I will hide my face from them.” Suffering ensues as a result of an eclipse of the divine presence. And God’s presence does become hidden in response to sin. But does this mean that the *only* reason for divine hiddenness is human sin?

Could it be that sometimes God’s face is eclipsed for reasons completely unrelated to sin? Could it be that God’s hiddenness is often not explainable in categories of sin and punishment?

King David, in fact, declares just such an understanding of divine hiddenness. In Psalms he clearly addresses the Deuteronomy text. David is describing the existential reality of the people to God: “You have given us like sheep to be eaten, you have sold your people for no great gain. You have not put high their prices. You make us a taunt for our neighbors, a scorn and derision to those around us. You make us a byword among the nations, a

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shaking of the head among the peoples. Their confusion is before me all the day, the shame of my face has covered me.” David is describing a reality in which the Jewish people suffer greatly. He then turns and says to God: God, I refuse to accept that our suffering is punishment for our sins, for God, we have not sinned: “Have we forgotten the name of our God or stretched our hands to a strange God? Had this been true would God not have searched us out? For does God not know the secrets of the heart? We have been killed for you, God, all through the day, we’ve been considered as sheep for the slaughter.”

David says to God: We are suffering, but we are innocent. Nothing we have done has earned the suffering. And David goes on to say: “Awake! Why do you sleep, God of Israel?” And finally, in the key phrase of the text he asks: “Why do you hide your face from us?”<sup>26</sup> The hiding of the face, says David, in a direct allusion to the Deuteronomy text,<sup>27</sup> is not a result of our sinfulness.

How does David know this? How can David reinterpret the simple meaning of the text in Deuteronomy? I believe the answer is simple. David knew his reality. David felt in the depth of his spiritual being that he had not sinned in a way to engender such torment, that the Jewish people are not culpable to the extent of their suffering. And therefore David, trusting his spiritual intuition, affirms the innocence of his people. David refuses to violate the integrity of his spiritual intuition with easy theodicies. Instead, David shakes God and screams out: “Awake, God! How can you sleep when your people suffer?” Clearly, this understanding of Deuteronomy is not limited to David. All of the prophets who cry out for divine justice, who demand answers to questions, affirm the legitimacy of the question.

If in fact the Deuteronomy text meant to tell us that all suffering is punishment for sin, there would be no place for the prophetic outcry, the prophetic question. Clearly, the prophet assumes, as a function of his deepest understanding of his and his people’s spiritual reality, that suffering is often unrelated to punishment. And, therefore, the only human response to suffering is to cry out, to challenge God; and through the challenge to affirm the reality of God in the world.



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## IX

All too often, in the public discourse of modern Israel, we hear of bus accidents in which children are killed being ascribed by religious figures to divine punishment. This cannot but lead people to reject, for in their deepest spiritual intuition they understand that twenty-eight children in Petah Tikva were not killed because God was punishing their parents for not keeping the Sabbath.

Unfortunately, this inability to trust intuitive, human questions, as well as the urge to suggest theological answers to the unanswerable, characterizes the entire spectrum of the contemporary Israeli religious community. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the response to the Holocaust.

There are two common responses to the Holocaust, both of which assume the “punishment thesis.” The first response, given most powerful expression in the works of R. Yoel Teitelbaum, the late hasidic rebbe of Satmar, suggests that the Holocaust is punishment for the sin of Zionism. On the other end of the spectrum of belief is a book written in 1944 by a former Satmar hasid, R. Yisachar Teichtel, who suggests the opposite thesis: The Holocaust is punishment for European Jewry’s failure to respond to the divine clarion call of Zionism. European Jewry ignored God’s outstretched arm beckoning them to return to the land of Israel. The two positions, the anti-Zionist Satmar position and the pro-Zionist position of *Em Habanim Smeiha*—which, incidentally, is a standard text in religious Zionist schools—advance an identical argument concerning divine judgment. Both assume knowledge of God’s ways in the world. Both suggest that the Holocaust is punishment for sin. They disagree only as to the nature of the sin.<sup>28</sup>

In the same vein, there is a seminar given in a prominent institution of learning in Jerusalem. In this seminar, one of the sessions covers patterns in Jewish history. The lecturer, at the crescendo of his presentation, says: “If one understands the deepest patterns of Jewish history, one understands that the Holocaust is not a challenge to our understanding of God. If the Holocaust had *not* happened it would challenge our understanding of God.” He then explains to the shocked audience that the pattern of Jewish history is the cor-



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relation between the suffering of the people and the sinfulness of the people. If the people sin, the people suffer. If the people in post-emancipation Germany abandoned God en masse, then the people must suffer. If they had not suffered, then the pattern of Jewish history would be violated and faith would be challenged. Thus he reaches the logical but obscene conclusion: Had the Holocaust not happened, it would challenge faith in our time.

In this anecdote as well, we see the presentation of religiosity as a proffering of answers. There are *no* questions that have no answers. We have explanations for everything. For babies dying, for distended stomachs, for bus accidents, and even for the Holocaust. Again, one whose intuition is repelled by the nature of these answers, who cries out in question, is taught that he has moved away from God. Once one understands oneself as having moved away from God, away from a religious orientation, then one needs to find oneself someplace else; one needs to orient oneself differently. Secular Israel presents a secular view of reality, with all that implies—morally, existentially and politically. Without question, one who is repelled by the easy theodicies suggested by the religious community cannot easily be open to the other messages of that same community, be those messages political, moral or existential. The result is the unnecessary bifurcation of Israel into two camps: The ostensibly religious, the ostensibly secular. If we were able to reform our language, to understand that questioning is the ultimate expression of spirituality, we would open ourselves up to creation of a community that includes all of Israel.

Theology, whether it be Zionist theology or hasidic anti-Zionist theology, can be used as an opiate which allows us to live in a state of insensitivity to human suffering and human pain. And indeed, this is what religion, in the hands of many of its practitioners, becomes: A tool for the systematic denial of the existence of injustice; rather than what God intends it to be—a tool for the systematic questioning of injustice.

Perhaps the most beautiful text which could be brought to bear at this juncture comes from Exodus, when Moses, having reluctantly accepted his divine mission, attempts to intercede on the people's behalf at Pharaoh's court. He succeeds only in making the plight of the people worse than before. And

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he turns to God and complains: "Why have you made it worse for this people?" God, you sent me to make it better, and now they suffer more. And Moses continues: "You have surely not delivered your people."<sup>29</sup>

Interpreters of the biblical text ask the obvious question: We need only to go back to the preceding passages to see that God has clearly mapped out his intentions to Moses.<sup>30</sup> There, God explains to Moses that the people will go through a short period of suffering which will purify them, and ultimately, after that suffering takes place, they will be redeemed. Does Moses not remember the divine plan? Did he forget what God told him in the previous two chapters?

The Talmud takes Moses to task for this and suggests that when he turned to God and said, "Why have you made it worse for this people?" he sinned.<sup>31</sup> But I would suggest that Moses knew precisely what he was doing, and that if indeed he sinned, it was mindful sinning. It was the sin of a leader, the very quality which made Moses who he was, and which caused him to be chosen as the shepherd of the Jewish people.

Moses knew very well that the divine plan involves suffering for the people. But Moses also knew that to be a leader and to be a human being, one can never allow theology to deaden one's sensitivity to human pain. God *himself* told Moses that there would be a divine purpose behind the suffering he would witness. And yet Moses, as a human being created in the divine image, understands that his only response to this suffering must be to cry out—to challenge and to question God. "God, why have you made it worse for this people?"

To do otherwise, to allow theology to silence his cry, would be to lessen God in the world. Moses knew, perhaps, that he would be punished for his challenge. He knew that in some sense it was sinful. But it was a mindful, chosen sin which embraced God—and so God responded to Moses by reaffirming his leadership of the Jewish people. Moses taught us that questioning the edict of suffering is not only an option, not merely a right, but an assertion of our essential humanity and of the divine image that resides within.

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X

The human question in the face of a brutal world is not only an expression of a human right, not only a divine imperative. It is also an expression of deep intimacy with God. If I were to stop someone I barely know on the street and challenge him with great intensity and depth, I would probably evoke a hostile reaction. If, however, I confront someone I deeply love, with whom I am in a close spiritual relationship, then the response will be very different. Questioning is a right which emerges from intimacy. Questioning in such a relationship is an expression of commitment, of relationship and intimacy. So it was with Abraham, with Moses, whose relationship with God was on such a level of intimacy that they were able to question his ways not as hostile opponents, not from the “outside,” but as those who are deeply “within.”

The question of why children suffer, I believe, cannot be posed by an atheist. It can only be meaningfully formulated by the believer. For if the world is finite, physical and natural, then there is no reason to assume that the world will be morally fair—cruelty and brutality make just as much sense in such a world as kindness and justice. Only if we assume the infinite, the metaphysical, the supernatural, only if we introduce a God who is good and who created a world with a moral law, do we find that we have the right to cry out when that moral law seems to be violated.

Paradoxically, the more deeply I learn of that relationship between God and moral law, the deeper I am intimate, the deeper my intimacy with God runs, and the more I have a right to challenge. For the God who is the source of loyalty, the God whom I experience in a relationship as a moral God, is a God whom I can challenge when evil seems to erase morality. It is the knowledge of God’s existence and the experience of the depth of God’s goodness which together create the right to question. That is the sense of the book of Job when Job cries out: “Though he slay me, yet I will trust in him. But I will argue my ways before him.”<sup>32</sup> Job is intimate with God. A function of that intimacy is Job’s right as well as his existential necessity to argue the ways—again that same word, “ways”—of God in the world. Job demands an explanation of these ways as his right as a human being who is deeply involved with God.

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In the Passover Seder, the Jews are represented as four sons: The wise son, the wicked son, the simple son and the one who has forgotten how to question. The lowest level is the fourth son, the one who has lost the art of questioning. The wise and the wicked sons both question, challenging the ritual of the evening. A careful reading would seem to indicate that their questions are identical. Both pose essentially the same question to the participants at the Seder: "What is the meaning of the Seder ritual for you?" There are those who have tried, based on the language of the text, to argue that in fact the wise son and the wicked son are asking different things, but I would suggest that in fact the simple reading of the text is the correct one. The wise son and the wicked son ask precisely the same question. If so, why is one son wise and the other wicked? The difference is that the wise son asks from within, as a function of relationship, of commitment and intimacy. The wicked son is the armchair philosopher who asks from outside, who is unwilling to involve himself in a relationship with the deepest issues of living, who sits cynically critiquing from the safe distance of dispassionate and non-intimate existence.

To be wise is not to arrive at a place of no questions. A place of no questions is the lowest level, the place of the fourth son, the son who does not even know how to ask. To be wise is to know how to question from a place of deep relationship.

## XI

The Jewish mandate which demands that the human being enter into partnership with God in the task of perfecting the world emerges, paradoxically, not out of answers but out of questions. The fact that the human being can question and that God accepts the human question implies a covenantal partnership between the human being and God. Both the human being and God share an understanding of the good. And thus God can turn to the human being and say: I invite you, nay, I demand that you be my partner, my co-creator in the perfection of the world. I began the process of creation, I established the moral fabric of the world. It is up to you to take that cloth and to

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weave it fully. It is up to you to complete the tapestry, it is up to you to create a world in which good, love, justice and human dignity flourish and are affirmed.

It is true that God very often seems silent in response to our question. Yet Jewish consciousness, expressed through Jewish text and tradition, affirms that God accepts the validity of the question. And in accepting the validity of the question, God says: I empower you as a human being, whom I created in my image, to act with me and for me on the stage of history.<sup>33</sup>

In the book of Judges, a messenger of God comes to Gideon. Gideon lives in a time in which Israel has suffered greatly at the hands of the Midianite nation. The messenger of God says to Gideon: “God is with you, hero of valor.” And Gideon responds: “You tell me that God is with us? Then why is all this...” He can’t even give it a name. Why has all this suffering, why has all this pain defined our lives for so many years? Why are men killed? Why are children orphaned? And the text goes on: “And where are all of his great wonders which our fathers told us, saying God took us out of the land of Egypt. And now, God has abandoned us.”<sup>34</sup>

Gideon the judge, in the tradition of Abraham, turns to God and says, “Does the Judge of the entire world not do justice?” Gideon the judge challenges God, challenges the messenger and challenges the message. Because if God is with us, if God is a God of history, if God is the God who took us out of Egypt, then where is God’s involvement in history today? Gideon anticipates Yehuda Halevi’s *Kuzari*, which argues that the God of the Jews is not only the God of creation—for us existence is not enough.<sup>35</sup> Our God is the God of the exodus, the God who involves himself in history, the God who emerges from the hiddenness and mystery and makes himself known to and through his nation Israel, and who embraces his people. Gideon asks: Is it true? I challenge you God. Where are you? You have not fulfilled your mandate. You are not the God of history. “Where are all [your] wonders?”<sup>36</sup>

The divine response seems unclear, enigmatic and troubling; but also powerful, inspiring and deeply directive. God answers Gideon: “Go with this strength of yours and save Israel ... behold, I have sent you.”<sup>37</sup>

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What does God mean? I would suggest, and Midrash Tanhuma implies the same, that God means: Go forth with the power of your question. Go forth with the power of your challenge to the divine: “With the power of your question, go forth and save Israel, for I have sent you, you are my messenger.”<sup>38</sup>

What does this mean? I believe it expresses precisely the same idea which we have discussed here: Gideon, if you have the ability to question, this means you share a common language with God, this means that you understand what is just and what is not. The question itself implies messengership on behalf of the divine.

## XII

I would like to conclude with a word from the tradition of Jewish mysticism, from the Zohar, the place of light.

Gideon says to God: “Where (*ayeh*) are all your wonders?” echoing Moses’ statement and Abraham’s: God, the world is not fair. God, people are suffering. God, I challenge you to help me understand.

R. Isaac Luria, founder of the most influential school of Jewish mysticism, the Lurianic kabala, comments on the word “where”—*ayeh*—in a different context. In the liturgy of the Sabbath, we paraphrase the text in Isaiah and say, “*Ayeh mekom kvodo?*”—Where is the place of God’s dignity? Efraim Orbach, in his masterful work, *Thoughts and Opinions of the Sages*, points out that the words “divine dignity” in biblical literature always speak of God’s involvement in the world.<sup>39</sup> The liturgical text therefore means: God, where is the place of your involvement in the world?

This question is the challenge that we have seen running like a thread through the Jewish tradition. Where, *ayeh*, is the God of Isaiah? Where, *ayeh*, is the God of Gideon? What does the interrogative word “where” really mean? Luria reveals its meaning by using the interpretive tools of kabala in the following manner: *Ayeh* in Hebrew has three letters, *alef*, *yod*, *hey*. The Zohar declares that there are ten levels which unite the world of the divine with the



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world of man. Each one of these ten levels of divine presence represents another dimension of God in our world. When we perform a commandment, says Luria, we participate in one of these levels of the divine. However, says Luria, we are only able to participate in the bottom seven levels. The human being, trapped in finiteness and mortality, can never reach the highest three levels of divinity in this world.

*Ayeh*, says Luria, is *alef, yod, hey*. *Alef* is the letter that represents the divine crown, the highest level of divinity in the world. *Yod* represents wisdom, the second highest level. And *hey* is intuitive understanding, the third-highest level. When the human being cries out to God, *ayeh*—when he cries: God, where are you? God, how does your world function? God, your goodness is so apparent to me that the contradiction between suffering and divine goodness is too much for me to bear. God, I return to you in challenge and in question—when the human being cries *ayeh*, says Luria, he reaches “the highest.” This is the level of identification of human and divine in the most profound sense possible in our world. Luria, in the tradition of the biblical text, affirms once again that the question is not a contradiction to the spiritual moment, but rather is the highest expression of human reaching for the divine.

There is, suggests R. Kook in a stunning passage, heresy that is faith and faith that is heresy.<sup>40</sup> Faith that is heresy never really experiences the goodness of God, and consequently never experiences the contradiction between God’s goodness and human suffering. Such faith therefore never asks the question. Heresy that is faith tastes and sees that God is good and thus cries out in a plaintive and powerful cry—God, how could you allow this?

Let us return to the idiomatic phrase, *hazara bish’ela*, “return in question,” and notice just how dramatically language can distort the spiritual sources of our people. People question in innocence, and yet those who speak for Judaism all too often demand that they stifle the question and accept “the answer,” because faith means *hazara bitshuva*, returning with the answer. And what an answer they wish for the people to accept: That the reason for the death of innocent children in this world is that we are being punished.



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The natural, healthy intuition of the people, when they hear such “religious” arguments again and again, is to reject. And then they reject everything—our sources, our tradition, our people, our God.

Yet in the tradition of the prophets, as in the tradition of the Talmud, when one questions the injustice in the world, one moves towards God. In the sources of our tradition, to return to God means to return in question—and it is the question, not the answer, which is the ultimate expression of spirituality. It is precisely when one is beset by question that one is, in the deepest sense, embracing the divine.

### XIII

I have tried in this brief article to redefine one phrase in the spiritual language of Israel. I have tried to demonstrate that through a return to the sources of Jewish authenticity, we can formulate a language that is more genuine and more true to Jewish history, and that will allow for shared spiritual communion between almost all sectors of modern Israeli society. In creating this language, we tear down old and false walls based on misperceptions, misunderstandings and distortions which have until now divided our public into the official cultural categories of secular and religious.

Through the creation of this language, I hope, a new conversation will be created, a conversation of the spirit which will ultimately unify and revive the eternal people living in its eternal land.

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## Notes

1. *Orot Hakodesh* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1985), vol. 1, p. 135.
2. See also *Arpilei Tohar* (Jerusalem: Hamachon Al Shem Harav Tzvi Yehuda Kook, 1983), pp. 8, 38-39, 45; also Gershon Scholem, *Kabbala and Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 49.
3. Song of Songs, 2:16.
4. Moshe Haim Luzatto, *The Way of God* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1978), I:2.
5. Menahot 43b.
6. Yoma 69b.
7. Deuteronomy 10:17.
8. Jeremiah 32:18.
9. See Isaac Hutner, *Pahad Yitzhak* (Brooklyn, 1978), volume on Yom Kippur, essay 5, sec. 3, no. 20 for a similar reading of the passage.
10. Daniel 9:4.
11. Rashi, *ad locum*.
12. Deuteronomy 32:4.
13. Exodus 33:13.
14. Brachot 7a.
15. Exodus 3.
16. Exodus 32.
17. Exodus 33:11.
18. Exodus 33:13. See interpretation of the text suggested in Brachot 7b.
19. Moses b. Maimon (Maimonides), *Guide of the Perplexed* (c. 1200), II:36.
20. I was first pointed to the development of the personality of Moses both as a leader and a prophet in an oral discourse of R. Aharon Lichtenstein.
21. Genesis 18:19.
22. Genesis 18:23.
23. For a development of this strain in the Midrash Tanhuma, see an essay by Chaim Shmuelevitz, entitled "Waters of Noah," in *Sihot Musar* (Jerusalem, 1980), sec. 1, essay 4.
24. Isaiah 54:9.

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25. Jeremiah 12:1; Habakuk 1:13; Job 11:32; Psalms 89; Malachi 3:13-15; Isaiah 49:14.

26. Psalms 44:12-25.

27. Deuteronomy 31:17-18.

28. Both R. Teitelbaum and R. Teichtel experienced the Holocaust directly. They are Job, whose wordly suffering defies normal human comprehension. Job's affirmations, Job's theologies, Job's expressions in relation to God post-Holocaust should all be understood to be holy. We, however, are not Job. We are only Job's brother. The holiness of affirmation, and the holiness of denial which belongs to Job, does not belong to the next generation. What for Job is holy is for his brother obscenity. I add this because I stand in a position of reverence and respect towards the positions of those two men who can, out of a Holocaust, forge religious language. However, I reject categorically the adaptation of that language as spiritually or theologically legitimate for anyone other than those who experienced it themselves. For us, the brothers of Job, to use theology as a response to suffering is, I believe, spiritual obscenity. And it is such obscenity which is unfortunately common theological currency in the religious street in Israel today.

29. Exodus 5:22.

30. Exodus 3, 4.

31. Sanhedrin 111a.

32. Job 13:15.

33. Man, a great hasidic master said, is the language of God. We are God's adjectives, God's adverbs, God's nouns and maybe even sometimes God's dangling modifiers. We are God's language in the world. When I love, when I am able to be truly vulnerable and intimate with another human being, when I am able to share the pain of another and to rejoice in their deep joy, I am acting for God. I become God's chariot in the world. God's chariot in kabalistic metaphor means the vehicle which carries the message and the warmth and the sweetness of the light of the divine throughout the world.

34. Judges 6:12-13.

35. *Kuzari* I:11.

36. Judges 6:13.

37. Judges 6:14.

38. See Rashi *ad locum*.

39. Efraim Orbach, *Emunot Ved'e'ot Shel Hazal*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978), ch. 3, pp. 31-32. [Hebrew]

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40. *Orot Ha'emuna* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1985), p. 25. "There is heresy which is like faith, and faith which is like heresy. How so? A person may believe that the Tora is from heaven, but his understanding of heaven may be so skewed that it allows for not a shred of true faith. And heresy that is like faith? A person may deny that Tora is from heaven, but his denial may be based purely on his having received such a view of heaven as is held by those who are full of meaningless and confused thoughts. He concludes that the Tora must have come from some higher source, and begins to find another basis—in the greatness of the human spirit, from the depths of man's morality or the heights of his wisdom. Even though he has still not arrived at truth's center, this 'heresy' is to be seen as faith nonetheless, and it approaches the faith of the true believer. And in a generation as revolutionary as this one, it is even to be understood as a high level. And the question of the Tora's origin is merely one example of that which is true for all the greater and finer points of faith—in the relation between their expressed form and their inner essence, the latter being the desired core of faith."