

## God Is Relocating

Lately, a strange feeling has gotten hold of me. I am not yet able to fully articulate it, but something tells me that God is relocating to a different residence. He has hired a moving company and they are at this time loading all His furniture and possessions into a van and awaiting His instructions as to the destination. The truth is He's been thinking for a long time about moving but has not yet done so because we, in our ignorance, are still busy visiting His old home, completely blind to the fact that the curtains have been taken down, most of His furniture has already been removed, and He is standing in the doorway, dressed in His jacket and ready to go. He nevertheless listens to us, smiling and feeling sorry for us that in our utter blindness we still believe we are sitting comfortably in His living room, chatting and having coffee with Him, while in fact He is sitting on the edge of His chair, gazing longingly at the door, dreaming of His new home.

Synagogues – whether Orthodox, Conservative or Reform – are no longer His primary residence. Surely some of the worshippers are pious people who try to communicate with their Creator, but overall, the majority of these places have become religiously sterile and spiritually empty. So God is moving to unconventional *minyanim* and places such as Israeli cafes, debating clubs, community centers, unaffiliated religious gatherings, and atypical *batei midrash*. The reason is obvious. In some of those places people are actually looking for Him. And that is what He loves; not those who have already found Him and take Him for granted. He is moving in with the young people who have a sense that He is there but cannot yet find Him. It gives Him a thrill. In some of these cafes He encounters young men sporting ponytails, without *kippot*, but with *tzitziyot* hanging out of their T-shirts, praying in their own words, attempting to find Him. In secular yeshivot, He meets women in trousers and mini-skirts who are earnestly arguing about what it means to be Jewish and who kiss *mezuzot* when they enter a fashion show. Then there are those who, to His delight, are keen on putting on tefillin once in a while and do this with great excitement; or who enthusiastically light Shabbat candles Friday night and can get into a serious discussion about Buddhism and how to combine some of its wisdom with Kabbalah and incorporate it into Jewish practice.

No, they don't do it because it is tradition, or nostalgia, as their grandparents did, but because they sincerely want to connect, to grow and become better, deeper and more authentic Jews, but at their own pace and without being told by others what they ought to do. They won't go for the conventional outreach programs, which try to indoctrinate them. No, they strive to come closer because of an enormous urge and inner explosion of their *neshamot*. No better place for God to be, even if these attempts may not always achieve the correct goals and are sometimes misdirected.

At these unconventional sites, theological discourses take place over a glass of beer, and the participants talk deep into the night because they can't get enough of this great stuff called Judaism. Many of these people want to study God and understand why He created the world and what the meaning of life is all about. What is the human condition? What is a religious experience? How do we confront death? What is the

meaning of Halacha? What are we Jews doing here in this strange universe? They realize that life becomes more and more perplexing, and these questions are therefore of radical importance. These are, after all, eternal issues. Who wants to live a life that passes by unnoticed? It is in this mysterious stratosphere that God loves to dwell. He can't get enough of it.

Regrettably, His interest wavers when He enters conventional synagogues. He finds little excitement there. People, including myself, seem to go through the motions, activate their automatic pilot, do what they are told, say the words in the prayer book, and go home to make Kiddush. Few are asking questions on how to relate to God, why they are Jewish and what their lives *really* are all about. Many do not want to be confronted with these nasty issues. They only disturb their peace of mind. A nice, conventional dvar Torah is good enough. After all, everything has already been discussed and resolved. Regular synagogue visitors – again, like me – only speak to Him when they need Him, but almost nobody ever speaks *about* Him or hears Him when He calls for help in pursuing the purpose of His creation.

So God is moving to more interesting places. He laughs when He thinks of the old slogan, "God is dead." It was a childhood disease. He knows we learned our lesson. It is too easy, too simplistic, and has not solved anything. He knows that He has not yet been replaced with something better. Oh yes, there are still run-of-the-mill scientists who believe that they have it all worked out. Some neurologists sincerely believe that "we are our brains" and that our thinking is nothing more than sensory activity. They seem to believe that one can find the essence of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony by analyzing the ink with which the composer wrote this masterpiece. There are even Nobel Prize winners who believe that we will soon enter God's mind and know it all, no longer needing Him. They are like the man who searches for his watch in the middle of the night. When asked why he is looking under the street lamp, if he lost his watch a block away, he answers: "This is the only place where I can see anything." These scientists have still not realized that there are more things, on earth and in heaven, than their research will ever grasp. They have convinced themselves that they are merely objective spectators and have not yet understood that they themselves are actors in the mysterious drama of what is called life.

And God simply winks. During the duration of this long-term disease beginning in the nineteenth century, antibodies have been developing to fight against the denial of His very being. Although atheism is still alive and kicking, many have become immune to all these simplistic ideas. Over the years, more and more antitoxins have accumulated, and we are now stunned by the fact that He, after all, may indeed be in our midst. Suddenly, an outdated hypothesis has come to life again. God is a real possibility, and we had better become aware of that.

But here's the catch: While the religious establishment is now shouting from the rooftops "We told you so," it has not yet grasped that this is completely untrue. The discovery of God did not happen because of conventional religion *but in spite of it*.

The truth is that the great shift concerning God took place far away from the official religious establishment. It is in fact a miracle that some people continued believing in God while religion often did everything to make this impossible. For centuries the church blundered time after time. Since the days when Galileo proved the Church wrong, it was constantly forced to change its position. And even *then* it did so reluctantly. The enormous loss of prestige that religion suffered because of it is beyond description. God was pushed into the corner. Not because He was not there, but because He was constantly misrepresented by people who spoke in His name. Since the Renaissance, many other great minds have moved the world forward; and while several may have missed the boat, a large number of them introduced radical new perspectives of the greatest importance. Yet, the Church's only response was to fight them tooth and nail until, out of utter necessity, when all its arguments had run out, it had to succumb and apologize once again for its mistakes. Time and again, religion lagged behind in sharing the victory of new scientific and philosophical insights. Ironically, long before the Church officially sanctioned these new discoveries, they were already part and parcel of the new world. As always, the imprimatur came too late.

And so religion paid a heavy price. Its territory became smaller and smaller. The constant need for capitulation made many people leave the world of religion and opt for the secular approach. And the story is not over yet. Scientists are now discussing the possibility of creating life forms in the laboratory that do not depend on DNA to survive and evolve. In all likelihood, several religious leaders will fight this again, with force and ferocity, and will probably have to succumb once more when they can no longer deny the hard facts of science.

But what was happening in the Jewish religious world? While it cannot be denied that Judaism, too, got caught up in all these debates, and quite a few staunch traditionalists were not much better than some of the church fathers, the overall situation within Judaism was much more receptive to scientific developments. While the Church declared in one authoritative voice—often the synod—that these new scientific discoveries were outright heresy, such pronouncements never took place in the synagogue. This is because Judaism is so different from other religions. Positions of unconditional belief were never its main concern. They were always debated, but never finalized as was the case with the Church. What kept Judaism busy was the question of how to live one's life while living in the presence of God and one's fellow man, as expressed in the all-encompassing halachic literature. Because of that, it did not see scientific discoveries as much of a challenge. There was also a strong feeling that scientific progress was a God-given blessing. The greatest Jewish religious thinker of the Middle Ages, Maimonides, was even prepared to give up on the concept of creation *ex nihilo* if it would be proven untrue. Although he was attacked for some of these radical and enlightened ideas, the general attitude was: let science do its thing, and if we were wrong in the past because we relied on the science of those days, we will now rectify our position. Even when the Talmud made scientific statements, many—although certainly not all—understood them to be the result of scientific knowledge of the day,

and not sacrosanct. And even when these debates became more intensive, it was never argued that opposing views should be absolutely silenced. There was no final authority in matters of belief, no Jewish synod. At the same time, many sages warned against making science into an idol that is all-knowing and can solve life's riddles.

*Nominally a great age of scientific inquiry, ours has actually become an age of superstition about the infallibility of science; of almost mystical faith in its non-mystical methods; above all...of external verities; of traffic-cop morality and rabbit-test truth. 2.*  
Louis Kronenberger, *Company Manners: A Cultural Inquiry into American Life* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1954) p. 94.

But today all this has changed. In many Orthodox circles, Judaism's beliefs have become more holy than the pope. Suddenly, there is an attempt to outdo old-fashioned Catholicism; to insist that the world is actually nearly 5,800 years old; that the creation chapter must be taken literally; that seven days consist of twenty-four hours each and not one minute more; that there is no foundation to the theory of evolution; and that the Talmud's scientific observations came straight from Sinai. That this happened in the past, when there was limited scientific knowledge, is understandable; but that such claims are still made today is downright embarrassing. It makes us blush. We can laugh about it only because the hopelessness of some of these ideas has already passed the point of being disputable. They have faded into flickering embers soon to be extinguished.

Surely it could be argued that possibly science will change its mind. But if the core beliefs of Judaism are not undermined (and they are not!), and as long as there is no indication that science will change its mind in the near future, there is no need to reject these scientific positions. And let us never forget that it is not even completely clear what these core beliefs are! So why fight modern science?

The incredible damage done by doing so is beyond description. It makes Judaism laughable and, in the eyes of many intelligent people, completely outmoded. It makes it impossible to inspire many searching souls who know what science teaches us. If not for this mistaken understanding of Judaism, many people would not have left the fold and could actually have enjoyed Judaism as a major force in their lives.

And it is here that many of us, including myself, are at fault. We blame the Synagogue for this failure, as we blamed the Church hundreds of years ago. Many of us have said, "Judaism has failed"; "It is outdated"; "I am getting out." But such statements are as unfair as they are illogical. Judaism is not an institution external to us, which one can abandon as one quits a hockey club. *We* are the Synagogue, and *we* are Judaism. When Galileo revolutionized our view concerning the solar system, it was not only the Church that failed; *we all* failed. Those who from the perspective of Galileo claim that the Church was backward are reasoning post factum.

We must realize that while Judaism consists of core beliefs and values that are eternal and divine, it is also the product of the culture during which time it developed. That, too, is part of God's plan and has a higher purpose. And when history moves on and God reveals new knowledge, the purpose is to incorporate *that* into our thinking and religious experience. Ignoring this is silencing God's voice.

*Religion will not regain its old power until it can face change in the same spirit as does science. Its principles may be eternal, but the expression of those principles requires continual development.* Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge University Press, 1925) p. 234.

That is why God is relocating. He doesn't want to live in a place where His ongoing creation is unappreciated and even denied.

We have replaced God with prayers, no longer realizing to Whom we are praying. We even use Halacha as an escape from experiencing Him. We are so busy with *creating* halachic problems, and so completely absorbed by trying to solve them, that we are unaware of our hiding behind this practice so as not to deal with His existence. In many ways this is understandable. Since the days of the Holocaust, we have refused to confront the problem of His existence due to the enormity of the evil, which He allowed to happen. So we threw ourselves into Halacha to escape the question. But while the problem of God's involvement in the Holocaust will never be solved, we must realize that the purpose of Halacha is to have an encounter with *Him*, not just with the Halacha. Halacha is the channel through which we can reach Him, not just laws to live by. Notwithstanding the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust, we must return to God. It's high time we realize that His *being* is of a total different nature than we have ever imagined. God can only be understood in a way that is similar to the relationship between a computer hard disk and what you see on the screen. What you see on the screen is totally different from what is inscribed in the hard disk. You can examine the inside of the disk using the most powerful microscope, but you will see nothing even slightly resembling pictures, colors or words. We are mistaken when we picture God based on the world screen. In no way does it reveal the actual contents of the hard disk, *God Himself*. All we know is that God's ways—which we see only through the external sense of sight—is somehow related to the disk. The problem is that we believe we can have a good look at God by watching the *screen*. But we haven't the slightest clue of what is actually going on in the *disk*. The Holocaust will always remain an enigma, but it can never deny the Divine disk. (See Yehudah Gellman: *God's Kindness Has Overwhelmed Us: A Contemporary Doctrine of the Jews as the Chosen People*, Emunot: Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah Series (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2012).

It is in those who are still uncomfortable with God that new insights about Him are formed. And it will be in those uneasy environments that Judaism will be rediscovered and developed. The need for religious transcendence, and for the spiritual thread that

keeps many young people on their toes, is enormous. Numerous secular people are joining a new category of spiritual theologians. Matters of *weltanschauung* are pivotal to many secular Jews now. The problem is that for them, and for the religious, the Torah is transmitted on a wavelength that is out of range of their spiritual transistors' frequency. Yes, we turn on the radio, but we hear strange noises and unusual static. There is serious transmission failure. We are no longer sure where the pipelines are. God has relocated.

In the world of physics, matters are becoming more and more hazy. Our brains are penetrating places where well-established notions, such as *matter* and *substance*, have evaporated. They have been transformed to puzzling phenomena. They have moved, and God has moved with them. Science is becoming intangible, and it's happening at a speed that we can't keep up with. It puts us in a difficult position and causes us anxiety. We are all living in exile, within a mystical landscape. Those who are aware of this are alive; those who are not have left this world unwittingly.

The question is whether we move our synagogues to where God is now dwelling. Will we, the religious, live up to the expectations of the young people in cafes and discussions groups who have preceded us? Will we apologize to them and join in their discussions, creating a real religious experience out of our synagogue service? Or will we, as usual, stay put, fight the truth, and then be put to shame?

When will we move Judaism to the front seat so that it once again becomes the leader instead of a follower?

Will we move to God's new habitat, or are we still drinking coffee in His old home where the curtains have been removed and He is long gone?