

***The God of Abraham, Yitzhak and Yonatan:
Alon Goshen-Gottstein talks with Heschel, Greenberg and Sacks***

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Introduction

In a famous television interview near the end of his life, Abraham Joshua Heschel announced that he believed, “God is a pluralist.” That is, God has willed—and continues to will--that a multiplicity of religions exist among His human creatures—and perhaps even more strongly, that each religion possesses a bit of Divine Truth.

If this is so, we are faced with a number of spiritual and intellectual challenges. On the human experiential level, how can we see the Image of God in the face of the religious Other? And how do we create the spiritual space to dignify and respect him? Can we find a way to validate his beliefs and even assert their truth without betraying our own religious convictions? And are there boundaries to religious legitimacy? How can we prevent this healthy pluralism from degenerating into unrestrained relativism that mocks the entire notion of Truth?

As Jews we need to find seeds within our biblical, rabbinic and halakhic traditions that can sprout to support this kind of theological openness. How can we find a way to let the Jewish fly out of its natural bottle of parochialism and theological ethnocentricity so it can enter our modern interreligious world?

These are the questions that burn within Alon Goshen-Gottstein’s soul as he engages three of the four most prominent Jewish pluralist theologians of our time—Heschel, Jonathan Sacks and Irving (Yitz) Greenberg. (The fourth theologian that Alon does not discuss here is David Hartman—but I assume that is only a matter of time.) Since the work under discussion has not yet been published, I will try to whet your appetite by presenting some of Alon’s reflections and questions about these three in order to provoke you, and perhaps inspire you to study Alon’s volume when it does appear on the bookshelves.

August 7, 2017;
For Contemporary Jewry -

While encountering these thinkers Alon probes their ideas and arguments to help him construct a coherent Jewish theology of religions. This enterprise is a kind of inquiry that could only occur in our modern era. It assumes a degree of pluralism, of acknowledging the validity of some other religions, and the possibility of comparing Judaism and other religions with uniform criteria that were never assumed by pre-modern religious Jewish authorities. In striving to discover the theological truth of—or at least the validity of—other religions, we run the risk of diluting the uniqueness and singular truthfulness of Jewish revelation. This in turn can easily undermine the unique mission of the Jewish people to carry out God's design in sacred history. Both dilutions are anathema to Jewish traditionalists, and hence it is no surprise that all these three thinkers have provoked strong rejections from traditional quarters: Heschel was summarily dismissed by establishment Orthodoxy, never to be taken seriously. In Galileo-an fashion, Sacks was forced to retract important theological claims he made in the first version of Dignity of Difference; while Greenberg has been totally marginalized by mainstream traditionalists.

Yet none of this is important to Goshen-Gottstein, who is interested only in pursuing truth, coherence, justification, spiritual meaning and practical application when examining these theological mavericks. On the contrary, one senses his deep appreciation for these trailblazers.

Alon engages in what I would call depth analysis, digging beneath the surface formulations—the *peshat*—to uncover the latent presuppositions, claims, arguments, tensions and implications of these thinkers. This especially true in his treatment of Heschel, since Heschel's terse poetic style often obscures the profundity of his ideas and approaches.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

In treating Heschel, Goshen-Gottstein emphasizes that, above all, Heschel taught us how to ask questions—particularly regarding interfaith experience and thinking. What does it mean to encounter a person in his full human-ness—in his/her luminous reflection of Divinity? And what necessary emotional and spiritual attitudes must we possess in order to fully realize this encounter with another? Alon correctly notes that Heschel's insights about the religious Other grew out of the web of his personal

August 7, 2017;
For Contemporary Jewry -

relations. Some of Heschel's closest spiritual friends were religious Christians. So he leads Alon to the question, "What is the role of interreligious friendship in understanding the other and his faith?"

Heschel clearly assumes that common human experience can form the basis of interfaith relations and understanding. There is no unbridgeable ontological gap here separating Jews and gentiles for Heschel, despite his hasidic roots.

Goshen-Gottstein emphasizes Heschel's intellectual integrity in examining the strengths and weaknesses his own Jewish tradition, particularly when engaging gentiles. This is refreshing considering the near ubiquitous white-washing apologetics among Jewish interlocutors with gentiles. Heschel taught us that honest introspection is another necessary condition of encountering the other.

This is only possible if we recognize a fundamental truth: God and religion are not identical. God is perfect; religion is not. In Jewish terms: The Torah may be inerrant, but our formulations of *halakhah* (Jewish law) are not. Apparently Heschel knows this non-identity with certainty from his own spiritual experience, the warm touch of the *shekhenah* (Divine Presence), which others also experience and whose reality he can share with others. This universal human capacity seems to be the very meaning of humanness for Heschel. If so, we must follow Alon's lead and ask, how do we cultivate this religious experience in ourselves and in others? And is it a *sine qua non* for fruitful interfaith encounter?

I read "No Religion is an Island" many year ago when I was a young man, and it changed my life. I reread it recently to acquire Heschel's warm unshakable mood in preparation for this essay. In some of his other works (notably *Torah min ha-shamayim*) Heschel plumbed talmudic and rabbinic tradition, but in his interfaith writings Heschel relied almost exclusively on the Bible and his personal prophetic insight. If so, Alon asks, to what extent is Heschel working out of the fullness of Jewish tradition, the tradition whose discourse came to be dominated by rabbinic and halakhic development? Heschel side-steps the entire problem of *avodah zarah* (illegitimate 'foreign' worship, sometimes connoting 'idolatry') that is so prominent in the rabbinic discussion of Christianity. Is this a tacit admission by Heschel that *halakhah* is incapable of meeting Christianity and Christians on respectful fraternal

August 7, 2017;
For Contemporary Jewry -

grounds, or simply his decision to speak to gentiles in their own terms? Is Heschel developing an effective new Jewish paradigm for religiously engaged Jews? Is this even legitimate in the context of Jewish religious and theological traditions?

Legitimate or not, there is no doubt that Heschel is casting—or translating—Jewish theology into a new form and into a new cultural practice.

It seems that Heschel also skirts the issue of relativism. His pluralism is conceptually distinct from relativism (He famously once pronounced to Vatican Cardinals that “if faced with the choice of the crematoria of Auschwitz or baptism, he would choose Auschwitz”), but Heschel never tells us where the borders are between his pluralism and relativism, nor how serious Jews can avoid the all-too-easy slide from his pluralism into the subjective relativism of all religious truth. Alon also notes that he seems to privilege Jewish religious truth over that of other religions, but never explains why or how this is so or explains the relation of Jewish truth to that of others. Surely this would be a fruitful theological project for people like Alon who are engaged in interfaith encounters and who insist on being faithful to their traditions.

Heschel believed that interfaith cooperation was not only desirable, but absolutely essential for the flourishing of humanity and to defeat the evil that still surrounds us all. Faith and commitment to the God of love and life is a bulwark against humanity’s descent into Nazi-like chaos. For Heschel, our choice is stark: between interfaith or inter-nihilism. So in Heschel’s theology of religions (although he never uses this term), the universal intuition of transcendence and the urgent need for interfaith collaboration form the bases for the interfaith encounter.

But again, how do we cultivate this sense of transcendence?

Jonathan Sacks

Goshen-Gottstein’s analysis is most acute when he tackles the writings of that once-but-now-repentant pluralist, Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Alon notes that most strategies for arriving at the validity of other religions rely on affirming commonality—either common theologies, personal intuitions or morality (*ala* Menachem Meiri), because in the last case affirming common moral principles seems to imply obeying the same God.

August 7, 2017;
For Contemporary Jewry -

Yet Sacks focuses on difference. How can we ascribe meaning and validity to our 'differences'? Thus the revealing title of Sacks' book, The Dignity of Difference. In it Sacks attempts a celebration of religions differences, and like Heschel he proclaims that "God creates religious pluralism," and relies heavily on a universalist reading of the Bible taken from Genesis chapters 1-11. Sacks' early pluralism seems to imply that all religions possess equal truth, and importantly, it is this truth that justifies extending respect and dignity to gentile worshippers. In this book Sacks does not put constraints on his absolute generosity. It was only years later, in Not in My Name, that Sacks explicated why religions of death and violence lacked theological legitimacy.

As mentioned earlier, Sacks' admission that other religions also possess truth made him *persona non-grata* among many of his rabbinic peers in England. They forced him to revise his book and his full-throated endorsement of *pluralism* and to retreat to the more restrained position of religious *inclusivism*. Alon skillfully parses the difference between the claims in these two versions. Here are some of them:

In version 1 all religions possess divine truth; in version 2 gentile religions are validated only by their adherence to the Jewish category of the Noahide covenant and obedience to its seven moral commandments. Their difference from Judaism is legitimated not by their possession of divine revelation, but by their human aspiration for God.

In version 1 God's universal love is responsible for conferring validity on religious diversity; in version 2 it is cultural diversity that leads to the need to dignity others, not the diversity of divine truth

In other words, version 1 finds value *in* difference, while version admits value *despite* difference.

I would add here that, paradoxically, it is actually version 2 that best expresses the book's title. The thoroughgoing religious pluralist seeks for not merely the 'dignity' of the religious other, but more strongly the 'sanctity' of the other and his worship. This emanates from theological truth not merely from human aspiration or moral discipline.

August 7, 2017;
For Contemporary Jewry -

Goshen-Gottstein points out that Sacks has not presented systematic philosophical arguments in either version to justify his respective claims. This is unfortunate, for in addition to supplying logical rigor, systematization would go far in clarifying which group of claims is more philosophically and spiritually grounded.

Irving Greenberg

Irving Greenberg is the most important proponent of Jewish ‘covenantal pluralism’, and the most engaged Jewish thinker to examine the meaning of Christianity. He differs from both Heschel and Sacks in trying to meet and affirm the validity of Christianity *on its own terms*. To do so he examines sympathetically—rather than critically, as is the standard in Jewish discourse—the Christian dogmas of Jesus’ messiahship, the incarnation, and the crucifixion/resurrection. This is in contrast to Heschel and Sacks, who studiously avoided venturing into the specific dogmas of Christianity—or any other religion for that matter—and stuck to the universal properties of other religions and the religious experience of their worshippers.

Greenberg views these Christian faith claims as valid and as a faithful extension of Judaism’s own theological foundations. Much of Greenberg’s analysis is an attempt to demonstrate that although these Christian dogmas contradict some biblical principles, these models nevertheless operate out of classic biblical modes. While denying that Jesus was in fact the messiah, Greenberg stresses that such belief is evidence for the vitality of the biblical dream. Woe to the generation that does not produce a would-be messiah, for it has lost its spiritual energy! Jesus is not a false messiah, merely a “failed messiah.”

Alon analyzes Yitz’ attempt to validate Christianity by appealing to Christian experience, noting that rather than any philosophical-like demonstrations of proving the truth claims of these dogmas, it is this experience that is the ground of their validation. As a Jew Greenberg is content to validate those experiences but as *relevant only to those who have had them*. Christians had those experiences, but Jews in Jesus’ time did not. Greenberg sees Christianity’s birth (and its endurance) as a triumph of fidelity in the face of tragedy that was rewarded with powerful religious experiences that taught Christian believers that God is present in their faith

August 7, 2017;
For Contemporary Jewry -

community. Christians experience God's love that has transformed their lives, and hence Christian claim of election is valid.

All this spiritual magnanimity has led to heated Jewish polemic, and, for most Orthodox rabbinical leaders, Greenberg's banishment from the Orthodox theological community.

But Alon is not interested in the polemic, only in evaluating Greenberg's criteria for theological validation and religious truth. Greenberg's method is, to use Alon's felicitous phrase, "a hermeneutic of empathy" that seeks to validate Christian experience by translating it into Jewish terms, without compromising basic Jewish theology. This is a heroic enterprise from a theological point of view—a kind of attempt to "square the circle." Psychologically, is it ever possible for a faithful Jew—rather than as an 'objective' intellectual analyst—to ignore Jewish criteria in order to evaluate another's religion or dogmas? Is it even a religious *desideratum*? There is inevitable tension between ones' own *weltanschauung* and another's religious world. Is this tension a source of creativity or just a naive and contradictory attempt doomed to failure? Can the tension ever be resolved? Should it be?

It seems then that experience has trumped ultimate Truth, that process has superseded content in Greenberg's "theology of Christianity." To return to the messianic question cited above, Greenberg's distinction between a false and a failed messiah hinges on how Christians treat Jews. When Christians persecute Jews in Jesus' name, he is a false messiah. When Christians bring love and consolation to millions around the world in Jesus' name, he is merely a failed messiah. Religious truth has given way to human action and moral behavior, not is not dependent on metaphysical, theological or historical proof. This sounds radical to traditional Jewish ears, but is, in fact, a creative variant of the theories of Meiri, and Rabbis Moshe Rivkis ("Ber Hagolah"), Yaakov Emden ("Ya'avets") and Shimshon Raphael Hirsch in their approaches to gentile religious forms in general and Christianity in specific.

In the end, as Alon stresses, this new theology of Christianity is for Greenberg most importantly about common action, about perfecting the world and hastening the Messiah's coming. Indeed what is common—although it sometimes only implicit—to

August 7, 2017;
For Contemporary Jewry -

all three of these theologians is the justification of theological ideas by their ethical and redemptive effects when they are adopted and lived out by the faithful.

Much of this brings us back to the issues of pluralism and its boundaries in constructing a Jewish theology of religions. As Alon noted, a serious defect in Heschel's thought is that he did not seriously confront, qua rabbi, the issue of *avodah zarah*—and I add here that Sacks does not treat it in depth either. Greenberg *does* tackle this issue (as well as the difference between his pluralism and relativism), and it is unfortunate that Alon does not analyze Greenberg's contribution here, because it has major import for the conceptual coherence and moral sobriety of pluralist convictions, as well for as the existential problem of maintaining faith while living in contemporary pluralistic culture. (Perhaps Alon has it in mind as a future 'project.')

In fact it was Greenberg who convinced me that we modern Jews should not drop the category—with its demand of near absolute of intolerance—entirely.

According to Greenberg,

Idolatry is the partial, created or shaped by humans, that claims to be infinite. Idolatry mimics the Divine and claims the absolute status of the Divine, yet it is in fact finite.¹

Fashioned in light of the *Shoah* and 20th century history this definition is a skillful fusion of Maimonides' definition of *avodah zarah* as cognitive error together with Meiri's conception idolatry of the absence of moral restraint, as Greenberg adds:

This pseudo-infinite cannot contain the infinity of life (or of human dignity). In fact, we know that idolatry is the god of death and that it creates a realm of death....All human systems (even those that are given by divine revelation) that claim to be absolute, exercise no self-limitation and leave no room for the other turn into idolatry, i.e. into sources of death...It is no accident that Nazism which sought perfection and eliminated all restrictions and limitations created a realm of total death—the kingdom of night....All political systems and all religions that allow themselves to make unlimited absolute claims are led to idolatrous behaviors. They often generate death-

¹ "Pluralism and Partnership" in *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth* (Jewish Publication Society, 2004) p. 210

dealing believers...All social systems that “other” the other and absolutize their own host culture turn idolatrous and then degrade or destroy others.²

Greenberg’s covenantal pluralism stands midway between the relativism of no absolute truths and the absolutist monism that insists on only one religious truth for everyone. As a moderating position, it functions as the corrective to the evils of both extremes that lead to either theological anarchy or brutal repression.

Today’s theological pluralists need to ask, “Without universal religious truth, is every conception of God permitted?” Under the pluralist principle, we must allow others to form their own God idea without imposing our own limits upon them. But if every form of worship is legitimate—even if only for others—do we not forfeit the right to criticize even those who worship the God of death and violence, and act accordingly? How can theological pluralism not collapse on itself by also validating religious intolerance and destruction?

Here we can see the need for Rabbi Greenberg’s conception of idolatry and the centrality of *Tselem Elohim* in his religious worldview. It is his concept of idolatry as human systems that claim to be absolute, that exercise no self-limitation and that leave no room for the other, which establishes the limit of legitimate theological pluralism—and in doing so, he saves theological pluralism from becoming a false idol of its own. Without Greenberg’s concept of idolatry, there would be no logical way to distinguish between a valid religious worldview promoting the sanctity of every person and one that destroys other persons in the name of God. Without this idolatry-limit, a principled pluralist would have no rational grounds for critiquing the religious imperialist who strives to violently impose his intolerant views on others.

Yet ultimately it is not idolatry’s logical function that makes it essential to Greenberg’s religious world, Alon’s world, or ours. Rather it is the prohibition’s role in steering persons away from delegitimizing others and the brutal carnage that absolutism brings in its wake. By insisting that idolatry is an evil that must be avoided, Greenberg directs religious people to the path of God Who loves his creatures.

² *Ibid.*

August 7, 2017;
For Contemporary Jewry -

Greenberg's definition of idolatry is the inverse of his covenantal pluralism. By insisting on the rejection of this idolatry, he teaches us to be partners with others who work to realize the prophetic biblical vision, the one where human beings flourish, where peace and cooperation reign and where different peoples recognize the Creator of heaven and earth—by whatever names they call Him and in whatever forms they worship Him. It teaches us that we must attempt to see the Image of God in the face of the Other and offers a way to work toward a future brighter than our dark conflicted past.

These were also the convictions of both Heschel and Sacks and the implicit salvific drive that animates Alon Goshen-Gottstein's project of a contemporary Jewish theology of religions.

Some Final Reflections

The above three Jewish theologians, as well as Goshen-Gottstein himself, ultimately find an essential role for God's love of his human creatures, and His hesed by endowing them with a bit of His Divine Self—*Tselem Elohim*. It is this universal Divine Love that ultimately mandates acceptance of all religions that lead to human flourishing and transcendence. Jewish theology needs to take the "God of Love" more seriously, even though it frequently embarrasses so many of us rabbinic rationalists.

Any contemporary Jewish theology needs to explicate the conceptual and spiritual differences between pluralism and relativism in a fuller and more profound way.

We must delve further into the concept of religious truth, and nurture a charitable—though bounded—understanding how to probe the truth of diverse religious concepts and claims and justify other religious practices.

We need to explicate *avodah zarah* in the context of contemporary experience and culture in order to distinguish between religious legitimacy and illegitimacy. This will enable us to celebrate constructive religious diversity as a reflection of the infinite God, as the *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 4:5 teaches, and one that makes sense of Asian and other non-Abrahamic religious experience.

August 7, 2017;
For Contemporary Jewry -

Heschel was correct. In our shrinking world of cultural, religious and demographic diversity, remaining stuck in a Jewish spiritual and intellectual ghetto is simply untenable. We are in dire need of a positive Jewish theology of religions—and we are indebted to Alon for pioneering this enterprise and in showing us how to take seriously the great Jewish theologians of the past as well as how to build on the shoulders of these three contemporary spiritual giants.

May Alon go '*me-hayel el hayel*'—from strength to strength.

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