APPROACHES TO GOD IN JUDAISM. NARRATIVE, PHILOSOPHY, THEURGY, AND THE CHALLENGE OF IMPERFECTION

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It is a daunting task to be the opening speaker at a conference devoted to the study of God. It is even more daunting to have to represent the entire scope of Jewish reflection on God in one single brief presentation, knowing that while Christian reflection will receive detailed and nuanced treatment in the lectures that follow, Judaism' s contribution to the present context is limited to these introductory remarks[1]. I have chosen to present Judaism's reflections and attitudes to God by highlighting three primary paradigms, that reflect three different historical periods and three distinct literary corpora[2]. Following this, I shall address the contemporary situation, and the possible insight that Christian scholars might glean from the paradigm I presented. Let me begin with the first paradigm, found in the Bible.

The First Paradigm: Biblical and Rabbinic Judaism

Jewish awareness of God is grounded in narrative. The earliest text that shapes Jewish understanding and imagination is the Bible, that tells the story of the relationship between God and Israel. God is known in the Bible not through philosophical abstraction, but through a narrative. The narrative is strongly historical. God is known in the context of the historical relationship he fashions with the Patriarchs, and with the people of Israel. The relationship is cemented in a covenant, that both regulates the relationship, and anchors the divine presence in Israel. What can be known of God from the Bible is not known from statements and propositions concerning him. It is known, for the most part, from stories that reveal God as

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[1] The enormity of the task that has been imposed on me necessitates my expressing myself in some broad generalizations, that disregard nuances, points of convergence, many exceptions to the rule, and so forth. In the brief overview that I am asked to present I can only offer a schematic presentation that highlights some fundamental types, and points to their historical development. I offer this description as a framework that may help orient future study, rather than as a detailed argument.

[2] I am not aware of a monograph devoted to a presentation of the image and notion of God in different stages of Jewish reflection. A good encyclopaedic survey can be found in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica,* vol. 7, 641-674.

he is known in the context of a relationship[3]. The biblical narrative shapes Jewish memory. This it does in conjunction with ritual, that plays out the narrative. A typical example of this is the festival that celebrates the exodus from Egypt, and in a sense: the foundation of the people of Israel – Passover. The narrative of God's saving action finds its counterpart in the ritual that re-enacts the original events, and thus carries forth the memory of the events, and the understanding of God that they express, from generation to generation[4]. God is thus known both through the stories told of him, and through the actions prescribed by him, and used by the community as a means of approaching him. The constitutive knowledge of God, that remains valid for all generations of Jewish life is that captured in the biblical narrative.

The biblical narrative is augmented by further narratives, those found in rabbinic literature. Rabbinic literature is replete with tales and proverbs in which God is portrayed in relation to his people Israel, individual figures, and primary culture values, such as the Torah and Temple[5]. These are shorter in scope than the biblical narrative, taken in its entirety. They serve to deliver particular morals and convey specific religious teachings. They expand the range of narrative reference to God. The biblical and rabbinic periods are the formative stage of Jewish religion and literature. The common feature of this period is that discourse of God is pre-philosophical, and resorts to tales, rather than to abstract notions. It thus speaks freely of God in a direct and unmediated way. Story and ritual complement one another in establishing this direct and primary approach to God.

By virtue of the narrative form God is portrayed as a literary character[6]. This is unavoidable once a narrative form of expression Is chosen. Thus, an image of God emerges from the biblical and rabbinic texts. This image constitutes the first of three paradigms I shall present. What can one learn concerning the image of God as it is finds expression in the earliest stage of Jewish literature?

Perhaps the most obvious, yet at the same time the most significant fact, is that God is approached as a personality. That God is portrayed as personality accounts for both the anthropomorphic nature of this earliest

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[3] On narrative and theology, see HANS W. FREI, *Theology and Narrative,* ed. G. Hunsinger, W.C. Placher, Oxford University Press, New York 1993, and the collection of essays, *Why Narrative?*, ed. S. Hauerwas and G. Jones, Grand Rapids, 1989.

[4] See *Exodus*, 12-13.

[5] A good sense of rabbinic parables of God can be held from DAVID STERN'S *Parables in Midrash*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1991. A large collection of parables (in Hebrew) can be found at the end of IGNAZ ZIEGLER'S *Die Königsgleichnisse des Midrasch* (Breslau, 1903).

[6] See DAVID STERN, *"Imitatio Hominis": Anthropomorphism and the Character(s) of God in Rabbinic Literature*, «Prooftexts», 12, 1992, pp. 151-174.

stage, and even more so – for His anthropopathic representation[7]. Thus, God is presented as a full blown figure, possessing the full depth of feelings known by humans. Anthropomorphism and narrative are deeply intertwined. One cannot, however, dismiss the depth of the anthropomorphic (and anthropopathic) approach to God as "simply" a product of the literary form of the earliest sources. The anthropomorphic approach to God as genuine personality creates a particular religious sensibility, and allows for specific dimensions of the religious life to find expression. Thus, relationship has concrete and real meaning when the relationship-partner is perceived in terms of personality. The very idea of the covenant, while not metaphorical in and of itself, is conditioned on the narrative and hence anthropomorphic view of the divine partner to the covenant.

The significance of the anthropomorphic approach goes well beyond the fact that it facilitates the adoption of a relational language. An anthropomorphic view gives meaning and reality to relationship. Hence, one can expect profound emotional engagement as a significant component of a religious view that genuinely approaches God as personality. Beyond emotional involvement, one can even speak of the intimacy of a relationship with God, which is made possible when God is approached as personality. Intimacy implicates two partners in a mutual relationship. Drawing forth the deepest feelings from the human partner, and providing a sense of fulfillment for the deepest human needs, are conditioned on the ability to relate to God in terms that are intellectually and emotionally derived from his representation as personality. That intimacy fulfills a deep need, and carries with it a quality of mutuality thus leads to one further salient feature of the narrative anthropomorphic representation of God. In both biblical and rabbinic texts one may legitimately consider God as having needs, that are fulfilled in the context of His relationship with Israel, or with individuals[8]. That God chooses to make a covenant, to enter a relationship with humans, that he continues to invest in this relationship despite all failures and frustrations, it may even be argued – the very fact that he creates a world – all these point to a divine need. This need is met in relationship with his creatures. Thus, the divine-human encounter fulfills a mutual need of both God and man. If the relationship is to be taken seriously, both partners must be viewed as being as fully invested in it. Full investment in the relationship points to the depth of mutual need. The an-

[7] See ARTHUR MARMORSTEIN, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God*, Volume 2: Essays in Anthropomorphism, London, Oxford University Press, 1937.

[8] See YOCHANAN MUFFS, *Love and Joy*, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, 1992, pp. 49-60; FRITZ A. ROTHSCHILD, *Between God and Man, an Interpretation of Judaism from the Writings of Abraham J. Heschel*, New York 1959, 140 ff. See also MARMORSTEIN, vol. 2, pp. 76-93.

thropomorphic representation ultimately draws our attention to the depth of divine need. This need may be understood as a need for love, recognition, relationship, power, etc. The formative texts do not usually articulate the nature of divine need. The need emerges from the structure of the relationship and from the flow of the narrative, rather than from any particular articulation. Hence, one cannot reduce the nature of the need to a single proposition. The essential point Is that the fullness of a reciprocal relationship Is founded on the depth of a mutual need.

If indeed God is fully implicated in a relationship with his creatures, which Is founded on mutual need, it Is obvious that relationship should be taken in full seriousness. Anthropomorphic representation allows one to view relationship, as well as all its implications – practical, emotional, etc. – as fully real, and thus totally compelling, and bearing direct personal significance.

There is a range of religious sensibilities and experiences that are easily galvanized when the relationship with God is perceived in the concreteness and fullness of its reality. Thus, it is easy to relate to God in terms of emotions such as awe and love, which are commonly engendered in human relationship[9]. The emotional approach to God is not contingent on a sense of the mysterium tremendum. While this Is certainly present in both the biblical and the rabbinic context, I would argue that the emotional conditioning of the relationship with God is more deeply informed by a sense of the immediacy and reality of the relationship, perceived in anthropomorphic terms. Hence, attachment to God follows understandable human paradigms. It calls for emotional commitment, and has practical behavioural consequences. It ranges from the most concrete expressions of practical faithfulness, witnessed in obedience to God's will made known in the relational context, to the deepest and most intimate feelings of love, as some readers find expressed in the *Song of Songs*[10]. Emotional depth and practical engagement thus characterize the spirituality that ensues from the anthropomorphic approach to God, representative of the earliest stage of Jewish writings.

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[9] Awe and love, are the archetypal religious emotive states, that describe man's internal state, facing God, from rabbinic literature and down to contemporary religious discourse. See EPHRAIM E. URBACH, *The Sages – their Concepts and Beliefs*, Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1975, pp. 400-419.

[10] See GERSON D. COHEN, *The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality*, in *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures*, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1991, 15 pp. 3-17. See further Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook's introduction to the *Song of Songs*, in his commentary on the Siddur *Olat Re'aya*, vol. 2, Jerusalem, 1949, pp. 3-4. I am currently working on a monograph on the rabbinic interpretation of the *Song of Songs*. Part of my argument is directed against the view of Cohen as an accurate perception of the rabbinic understanding of the *Song of Songs*. That a latter day spiritual authority as Rav Kook espouses this understanding of the *Song of Songs* suggests that it is certainly part of the Jewish understanding of the *Song of Songs*.

Philosophically, the most important challenge that arises from the above presentation Is that of divine imperfection. While the biblical and rabbinic authors comfortably relate to God as personality, they do not offer us a theory of how this approach is compatible with a sense of divine perfection. There is clearly an implied understanding of divine perfection[11]. This finds expression in numerous representations of God's goodness and wisdom. It drives the quest for theodicy. To a large extent it motivates the very quest for God. However, in the earliest strands of the literature divine perfection is neither articulated, nor does it seem to be threatened by the depth of need that God exhibits. Thus, one cannot find a discussion of whether the divine willingly limits itself in order to enter a relationship, and has thus been constricted of its own accord, or whether this is simply the person of God. The challenge that change, transformation and need pose to a philosophical view of God are simply absent in this earliest stage of the Jewish approach to God. This heritage will provide a formidable challenge to later Judaism. However, its tools for dealing with this challenge will not be provided by the earliest strata of the literature, but from beyond them. This brings us to the second paradigm.

The Second Paradigm: Judaism's Encounter with Philosophy

The second paradigm emerges out of the encounter of Jewish tradition with Greek philosophy, as transmitted by the Muslim philosophers of the middle ages. The entire system of Jewish belief undergoes a major transformation as a consequence of this encounter. This transformation calls for a major reinterpretation of the classic tradition in light of a new understanding. The entire process is undertaken by a series of figures, commonly referred to as the Jewish philosophers of the middle ages. Perhaps the most towering of these figures is Maimonides, who, however, is only one of the many thinkers who tackled the philosophical challenge posed to Judaism by the Greek philosophical tradition, common to Jews, Christians and Muslims[12]. From a philosophical perspective one cannot speak of God as It may be argued that the very notion of perfection is what necessitated the reinter-

[11] What such perfection entails can be seen from the presentation of the attributes of God in the second part of ARTHUR MARMORSTEIN'S *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God,* London, (Jews' college publications, no. 10), 1927.

[12] On the Jewish Philosophers of the middle ages, see JULIUS GUTTMAN, *The Philosophy of Judaism,* Jason Aaronson, Northvale, 1988, part II. The project of systematic reinterpretation of biblical and rabbinic tradition is perhaps most obvious in Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed. The first of three parts is devoted to a philosophical reinterpretation of biblical words and expressions, whose plain sense is philosophically unacceptable.

pretation of earlier tradition. In contrast to the engaged anthropomorphic image of God, philosophers strove for the ideal of the unchanging and unmoving perfect God. Change, let alone need, would imply deficiency and imperfection, which could not be attributed to God. Hence, the perfect and unmoving God, and hence the need to reinterpret all of earlier tradition.

On a philosophical perspective one cannot speak of God as personality. Perhaps the best way to express the philosophical sentiment is to speak of God as concept or ideal. While God is clearly also *Being,* there is a large measure to which Cod functions as an ideal of perfection. As a perfect concept or a concept of perfection, it is obvious one cannot enter the same immediacy of relationship with God as was enabled by earlier anthropomorphic language. This does not mean there is no religious experience attendant upon this kind of approach to God[13]. It is, however, a different kind of religious experience. The approach is a cognitive approach. God Is there in order to be known[14]. Human perfection consists of the perfect knowledge of God. Significantly, earlier tradition virtually lacks any reference to the knowledge of God as the quest of the religious life[15]. It is only in a philosophical context that knowledge becomes the hallmark of the approach to God. Knowledge may well transcend the intellectual connotations we tend to ascribe to it upon first listening. Indeed, the height of true knowledge of God may be presented in mystical terms[16]. Still, it is through knowledge, of a philosophical nature, that such mystical heights are attained. Ritual behaviour and emotional attitude are at best complementary to the philosophical path of perfection.

That the path of perfection is through knowledge, rather than through action, places the philosophical tradition in profound tension with earlier stages of Judaism, that highlight proper action in conformity with the will of God as the goal of the religious life. This does not imply that al philosophers must be antinomian. It does, however, point to a deep tension be-

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[13] See EHUD BENOR, *Worship of the Heart, a Study in Mairnonides' Philosophy of Religion*, Suny Press, Albany 1995.

[14] See SIMON RAWIDOWICZ, *Knowledge of God: A Study in Maimonides' Philosophy of* Religion, in *Studies in Jewish Thought*, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1974, pp. 269-304.

[15] Knowledge of God is certainly assumed in the Bible. Pharaoh's lack of knowledge is the reason for the plagues. See *Exodus* 5,2; 8,6. Knowledge of God is also seen as a goal in *Deut.* 4,35 and 9,5. However, the knowledge of God is never a commandment, in the sense that Maimonides suggests, when he lists it as the first of the positive commandments. The only biblical text that may be taken as a command to know God is *1 Chronicles* 28,9. Significantly, there is not a single rabbinic passage that picks up on the earlier part of the verse, that calls to know God. The different place that knowledge of God occupies in the different strata of Jewish thought illustrates well the shifting emphases. I have not seen this significant difference elaborated in any of the common presentations of rabbinic Judaism.

[16] On the philosophic mysticism of Maimonides, see DAVID BLUMENTHAL, *Maimonides: Prayer, Worship and Mysticism*, in *Prière, Mystique et Judaïsme,* ed. R. Goetschel, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1987, pp. 89-106 (= *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times,* Atlanta, 1988, 3, 1-16).

tween the significance of revelation, and the way of life that is founded upon revelation, and the eternal philosophical truths, the knowledge of which leads one ultimately to union with God. Different philosophical figures differed in how they reconciled revelation and philosophical truth, or in other words: what place they allotted in their system of thought for classical ritual observance[17]. Maimonides was clearly a champion of both tracks. How he reconciled his philosophical belief with his activity as a codifier of Jewish law remains an issue of scholarly debate to this day. Scholars still differ to what extent and in what manner Maimonides successfully integrated the heritage of earlier generations with his philosophical system[18].While the integrity of Maimonides' own religious observance is beyond doubt, many of his followers, or those who invoked his name, were less successful in harmonizing rabbinic and biblical legal heritage *(halacha)* with their philosophical beliefs. The middle ages witnessed charges of antinomian phenomena, engendered by the philosophical approach to God, the biblical story and biblical law[19].

It would be fair to say that in a Jewish context the litmus test for the viability of a religious path is its conformity with Jewish law. The greatest difficulty the philosophical movement posed to traditional Jewish religiosity carne not from its reinterpretation of the biblical and rabbinic narrative, but from the perceived threat to Jewish observance. Whether fundamentally necessary, or only an accident of history, the philosophical movement was perceived as threatening obedience to Jewish law. This in turn produced a counter-reaction, that found expression in the Jewish mystical movement – the Kabbala.

The Third Paradigm: The Kabbalah

One would be guilty of gross oversimplification to claim that Kabbala emerged simply as a response to the threat of philosophical antinomianism. In fact, recent scholarship has seriously challenged the notion that kabbala only arose as a historical movement as a reaction to movements and currents in the middle ages[20]. However, it is clear that the spread of the kab-

[17] See GUTTMAN, *The Philosophy of Judaism,* index, s.v. revelation.

[18] See DAVID HARTMAN, *Maimonides. Torah and Philosophic Quest,* Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1976.; ISADORE TWERSKY, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah),* Yale University Press, New Haven, 1980, part 6.

[19] On the maimonidean controversies see JOSEPH SARACHEK, *Faith and Reason: the Conflict over the Rationalism of Maimonides,* Williamsport, 1935. Note, for example, p. 181.

[20] This is one of the significant contributions of MOSHE IDEL'S *Kabbalah, New Perspectives,* Yale University Press, New Haven, 1988.

bala and its appear are related to the fact that it provided a matrix from which to address the challenges posed to traditional biblical and rabbinic spirituality by the philosophical movement[21]. Both the threat to religious observance and the philosophical challenge to the earlier narrative are overcome by the system of the kabbala. We thus introduce the third paradigm of the Jewish approach to God – the kabbalistic paradigm.

In the present context one might describe the kabbalistic tradition as a kind of second naivité. The kabbala allows a return to, or a restatement of, much of the fundamental religious spirit that characterized pre-philosophical Judaism. However, the same spirit that emphasized the significance of action, feeling and religious intention, and that did not refrain from recognizing a divine need, gives an expression to these dimensions in a form that is far more systematic. The systematic form not only echoes the systematization of the philosophers, but also directly tackles the challenges posed by the philosophers. In this sense, one may portray the kabbalistic second naivité as a synthesis of features of pre-philosophical Judaism and the philosophical drive for systematization[22].

For the kabbalist, or at least – for a particular type of kabbalist, the drive for knowledge of God has been united with fidelity to the religious way of life, prescribed by halacha. In order to appreciate this synthesis, we must first highlight the particular nature of the kabbalistic approach to God. If the first paradigm presented God as personality and the second paradigm presented God as concept, the third paradigm presents God as an organization, a system, and a living being[23]. Theosophy is a prominent feature of kabbala. The kabbala is founded upon a detailed description of the structure of the Godhead. However, the knowledge of the inner structure and workings of the Godhead are not an end in and of itself. This knowledge serves both a hermeneutical and a ritual purpose. It thus justifies and re-establishes the significance of both the narrative and the legal parts of the Torah. For the kabbalist, the inner structure of the divine is reflected in the structure of the torah, its narrative and the event it tells. Thus, the Torah is no mere tale of events, but a constant referencing of the internal life divine. The narrative of the Torah no longer represents God as one of the characters in the biblical tale. The entire text of the Torah is read as addressing the life of God, and God is thus the true subject of the biblical narrative[24].

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[21] See YITZHAK BAER, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain,* Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1961, vol. 1, 243 ff.

[22] See YEHUDA LIEBES, *De Natura Dei. On the Developments of the Jewish Myth*, Chapter 1 in his *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism*, Suny Press, Albany, 1993.

[23] See GERSHOM SCHOLEM, *Kabbalah,* Jerusalem, 1994, p. 88 ff.

[24] See GERSHOM SCHOLEM, *The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism*, Chapter 2 in *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism,* Schocken, New York, 1969.

Even more significant is the relationship between ritual behaviour and the inner life of God. Unlike the philosophers, for whom the exclusive purpose of the ritual commandments, the *mitzvot*, is to help in man's education and evolution, for the kabbalists the purpose of the *mitzvot* touches upon the life of God. The significance of the knowledge of the structure of the Godhead is that it provides the key to the proper performance of the *mitzvot*. It is no chance that kabbalists wrote extensively on the rationale for the *mitzvot*, grounding their significance in their theurgic function[25]. The life of God and the life of man, or Israel, are profoundly intertwined. There is a fundamental affinity of being, following an identical structure, by virtue of which one may say both that God's life is lived within the life of his creation, and that creation lives its life within God. Consequently, a deep relation of interpenetration and interdependence exists between God and creation, or God and Israel. One may suggest this is a symbiotic relationship. The clear implication of this relationship is that God needs the efforts and good deeds provided by Israel. As a celebrated kabbalistic maxim has it: 'The service of God fulfills a need on high"[26].

It is easy to see how the kabbalist expresses, albeit in a new context and in new ways, the same fundamental intuition by means of which we described the formative stage of Jewish writing. The relationship with God is one in which mutual needs are played out and met. The seriousness of the relationship as such is indicated by the fact that it serves a reciprocal, and not a one sided, need. One may toy with the possibility of representing the difference between the first naivité, found in biblical and rabbinic literature, and the second naivité, found in kabbala in the following manner: Whereas in the former case we find a reciprocal relationship, within which we can recognize a need, in the latter case we encounter a reciprocity of need, that finds expression in a relationship. The kabbalistic portrayal of mutual need is articulated in the context of a systematic understanding of the Godhead. In this context the very issue of divine need and its implications are addressed. The kabbala, in different stages of its formulation, consciously struggles with the implications of its theology for an understanding of divine perfection. That there is a divine need that Israel's faithfulness serves, and more fundamentally: that creation itself serves an internal divine need, point in some sense to divine imperfection. In some contexts

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[25] See DANIEL MATT, *The Mystic and the Mizwot*, in *Jewish Spirituality*, ed. A. Green, Crossroad, New York, 1986, vol. 1, pp. 367-404.

[26] The maxim is found in R. MEIR IBN GABBAI'S *Avodat HaKodesh*. See EFRAIM GOTLIEB, *The Meological and Mystical Element of the Kabbala's Understanding of the Role of Man*, in *Studies in the Kabbala Literature*, ed. J.Hacker, Tel Aviv University, 1976, 29-37 (in Hebrew). On kabbalistic theurgy, see IDEI, *Kabbalah, New Perspectives*, p. 173 ff.

this is addressed in the context of accounting for the problem of evil[27]. In other contexts, divine imperfection is juxtaposed to divine perfection, as two complementary aspects of the divine life. Thus, for Rav Kook, divine life knows two aspects of perfection, one grounded in static being, and one growing through dynamic becoming. The dynamic aspect of eternally growing in perfection views God in creation, and involves creation, as an expression of God's own life, as a process of learning, growth and evolution, producing evolution in the very life of God[28].

A central concept in kabbalistic thought is "Tikkun" – reparation[29]. The concept addresses the rectification and reparation of lost divine and cosmic harmonies. To understand the background against which such a concept is employed, one must recognize the role of myth within the kabbala[30]. In the same way that the kabbala gave more potent and pointed expression to the sense of mutual need and mutual dependence that was articulated in a less definite manner in earlier literature, so too it takes the narrative that involves God and makes it more pointed and powerful. Instead of God being one character in the narrative that involves both God and man in a common story, the kabbala tells the tale of God's inner life, and of man's associations with it. As a tale of the life divine it can thus be presented as myth. The kabbala thus moves from narrative to myth. The biblical narrative is intertwined with the kabbalistic myth, providing a framework that endows human religious behaviour with the utmost significance. The power of reparation is entrusted to man. Man's faithfulness to divine commandments aids in the rectification of a fallen divine world, a fallen cosmos and a fallen human world. One cannot overestimate the importance allotted to man, and more particularly to Israel, in such a structure of thought. The reciprocity of need is very far reaching. The human, endowed with divine power, provides God with some of the capacities that are traditionally exclusive to God. In some senses, both creation and redemption apply not only to God but to man as well.

The kabbalistic system allows one to take in the most serious way the implications of relationship and need, as articulated in former stages of Judaism, and to empower man in the fullest sense. Where for the earlier sources faithfulness to a relationship provided the primary expression of

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[27] See ISAIAH TISHBY, *Torat Hara Vehakelipa Bekabalat Ha'Ari,* Tel Aviv, 1942, p. 52 ff.

[28] RABBI ABRAHAM ISAAC KOOK, *Orot Hakodesh,* part 2, p. 529 ff.

[29] See GERSHOM SCHOLEM, *Kabbalah,* p. 140 ff. See also LAWRENCE FINE, *Tikkun: a Lurianic Motif in Contemporary Jewish Thought*, in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism,* FS Marvin Fox, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1989, vol. 4, pp. 35-53.

[30] See GERSHOM SCHOLEM, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism,* Schoken, New York, 1965, chapter 3: Kabbalah and Myth.

the religious life, later kabbalistic spirituality is founded upon a theosophical understanding that leads to effective theurgical action.

Let me now relate the three paradigms I presented to the modem situation. The modem situation may be characterized in terms of both continuity and crisis. Regarding continuity, it is a fact that al three paradigms continue to exist in some form or another up to present day Judaism. Thus, one cannot claim that Judaism has made a definitive choice between any of the approaches to God described above. All are considered legitimate, and all have their representatives and followers. Because my presentation has been schematic it could not account for the full complexity of the multitude of religious perceptions available within Judaism. The three paradigms continue to exist both in their relatively pure forms, and in numerous hybrid forms, that amalgamate features of the different approaches.

On the other hand, one must reckon with profound crisis in the Jewish attitude and relationship to God. There are several factors in light of which one may speak of a contemporary crisis regarding the approach to God in Judaism. First of all, Jewish society shares in wider social and ideological processes that are characteristic of modem societies in the west. A loss of faith in traditional forms of religious belief Is characteristic of the modem west, and its ravages have not spared Judaism.

More specifically, there are forces within Jewish history that have brought traditional approaches to God to a point of crisis. First and foremost is the *Shoah*. For some thinkers the very existence of God is called into question by the horrors of the holocaust[31]. For others, the *Shoah* may not be unique, but simply one further expression of the pains of Jewish history, and dealing with it is no different than the challenge of theodicy under other circumstances[32].

Nonetheless, one may grant that even if the *Shoah* does not present an unprecedented challenge to the ability to believe in God, it does pose a serious challenge as to the form of such a belief. As the contemporary thinker, Rabbi Irving Yitz Greenberg argues, any contemporary theology must be measured against the manner in which it handles this sensitive subject. This challenge to Jewish faith has yet to be met.

From a completely different angle, Jewish history may lead to a relativization of the quest for God. Judaism is not only the name given to a religious system. It also has a major ethnic component. I have elsewhere of-

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[31] See RICHARD RUBENSTEIN, *After Auschwitz,* second edition, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1992, part 3: Theology and Contemporary Judaism.

[32] For a careful discussion of uniqueness with regard to the holocaust, see STEVEN T. KATZ, *The Holocaust in Historical Context,* Oxford University Press, 1994.

fered the definition of Judaism as «the enduring story of Israel's life in the presence of God»[33]. This definition takes into account both the dimension of God's presence which the present essay addresses, and the fact that in Judaism this theological dimension is played out in the context of the life story of a particular people. In the contemporary situation a strong battle is raging between different factions of the Jewish people. Certain factions continue to espouse the traditional definition of Judaism, including its theological content, while others opt for a national definition of Judaism, that eliminates the theological dimension. This battle takes place throughout the Jewish world, but especially in the land of Israel, where the struggle over the nature and spirit of the young state is part of the fabric of life. Thus, the contemporary historical situation places one further challenge before a contemporary approach to God within Judaism. This is the challenge of the understanding of Judaism that strips the theological dimension away from Judaism, and valorizes its national and ethnic components.

Even within the traditional religious camp one may speak of a crisis in the approach to God. While the different paradigms spelled above continue to exist as teachings and as schools of thought, on an experiential level even many forms of traditional and orthodox Judaism are experiencing a crisis in their approach to God. The roots of the crisis within the traditional camp go deeper than contemporary history. To a certain extent they may be grounded in the tensions to which this essay has draw attention. Can God be approached as a person, in the context of a living relationship, or is God to be understood as a concept, that is removed from the realm of direct relational experience? Even if the question is resolved intellectually, it is often left unresolved educationally and experientially. The high premium placed upon excellence in religious behaviour and in the study of the Torah often obfuscate the fact that God is lacking as a real presence in the lives of even some of the most excellent of his people. This lack may itself be viewed as a product of a difficult history, and may be labeled a form of spiritual exile[34]. Alternatively, it may be viewed as a product of the particular psychological, educational and experiential emphases and preferences that are characteristic of how Judaism as a social entity takes shape. These emphases may come at the expense of the cultivation of those paradigmatic experiences and approaches to God that are found in the Jewish sources. There is thus often a discrepancy between Jewish teaching and lived Judaism, as this finds expression in the lives of religious communities.

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[33] I am currently completing an introduction to Judaism that uses this phrase as its working definition of Judaism.

[34] The kabbalists refer to the exile of the divine presence, *Galut Hashekhina*.

This discrepancy too is part of the contemporary crisis. Needless to say, to the degree that there is an internal crisis in the existential ability to relate to God in terms of the classical paradigms, this creates a further distancing from the theological dimension of Judaism, and further reinforces those forces that seek to undermine the necessity of an approach to God as a constitutive feature of Judaism.

Against this background of crisis, it is striking to point out the enormous vitality of contemporary efforts at articulating a Jewish theology and of finding an approach to God that is suitable to the contemporary situation. David Tracy once remarked that for him, as a Christian theologian, the greatest source of inspiration is the great harvest of original Jewish theologies, formulated in recent decades. These theologies have at their disposal the great wealth of approaches to God, articulated in this essay, as well as their numerous permutations. They seek to articulate in ever fresh ways the forms in which one can approach God in the contemporary situation. Thus, alongside an ongoing crisis are found constant attempts at rejuvenation and reformulation of the classical intuitions that underlie the Jewish approach to God. It seems to me that the degree to which these efforts are successful may well depend on the measure to which they are able to integrate the different paradigms presented above, in other words: relate to God as living presence, and not only as the constitutive ideal of the religious system. One component of the contemporary challenge echoes the tension between the different approaches to God, described in this essay. If my historical presentation is valid, it is vital for a contemporary Jewish theology to remain in touch with all elements of tradition, and particularly those that express the immediacy and the potency of the relationship with God, and that ground their view of Judaism on this awareness of the relationship with God. A final word is in order concerning the contemporary inter-religious situation. There is an obvious give and take currently taking place between Judaism and other religious traditions. In this give and take both sides stand to benefit. From the Jewish side, I believe much can be gained and learned from the encounter with both the reality of faith and its conscious articulation, as found in other faith traditions. One approach to the current crisis might be to expand the perspective of reflection from purely Jewish roots to a wider religious context, and to draw insight and support from other traditions and the way in which their faith may serve as inspiration. My experience has been that an encounter with other faith traditions can help stimulate and reawaken dormant parts of one's own tradition. Thus, in the tension between God as relational presence and God as concept, the testimony of other believers may open gates to rediscover the reality of the Jewish faith and its doctrines.

On the other side, I would like to highlight in the present context, the contribution Jewish reflection on God may make to a contemporary discussion of God, carried out in the context of other religious traditions. Having been invited to deliver this address as a Jew speaking to Christians reflecting upon God, I ask myself what message or challenge emerge from Jewish sources that may be relevant to the deliberations of the Christian discussants. It seems to me that the major insight and the major challenge that emerge from my presentation concern the notion of divine imperfection. Understanding divine imperfection may be a major challenge to historical theology, both Jewish and non-Jewish, as it seeks to articulate the meaning of different faith positions, and the way in which divine imperfection relates to the opposite intuition of divine perfection. It may also prove a major challenge to contemporary theology, seeking to articulate a notion of the divine that can withstand the test of the *Shoah,* and account for the evil that man can perform in the face of God. The entire cluster I have proposed above, consisting of relationship, need, and divine limitation may prove fruitful in religious deliberations both in a Jewish context and beyond it.