

In April 2014 the journal Sh'ma focused on various meanings of spirituality. Rabbi Arthur Green, rector of the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College, opened that issue with a call for spiritual engagement that seeks to update the tropes of Hasidism, where the focus is on the personal encounter with the divine. Joel Hecker, Ph.D., was among the prominent scholars and spiritual leaders who responded to Green's call and raised their own questions and challenges.

The Torah as God's Garment

Joel Hecker

Rabbi Arthur Green's invitation to participate in a neo-Hasidic revision of pious mysticism has been resonating with me since I bought my first scholarly work 30 years ago, his two-volume edited collection titled *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible Through the Middle Ages*. Newly Orthodox, and in rabbinical school at Yeshiva University, I was seeking rigorous intellectual analysis as a second anchor for emotionally imbibed beliefs about God's commanding voice at Sinai. The thick culture of pious ritual observance had provided me with a solid religious scaffolding that could sustain an orientation toward commandedness — but piety was not enough.

On a personal theological level, my study of Kabbalah over the past 20-plus years has loosened my need for literalist interpretations of Judaism's foundational myths, even as it has deepened my commitment to the effects of those same myths. To put it plainly, because the Kabbalah, and the *Zohar* in particular, ascribes divine significance to every phrase, every commandment, even every letter and cantillation note of the Torah, each and every act of study, prayer, or ritual observance becomes a moment of potential encounter with divinity. For me, deep engagement with Jewish texts and practice can sustain an attachment to the myth of Sinai without blinkering historical critique.

For Jewish mystics, the Torah was God's garment, and its stories and commandments were the lenses through which one could perceive divinity. They recognized, though, that if we read the Torah's stories for their surface meaning, or if we perform rituals with legalistic fetishism, the inner light, beauty, and truth of the stories would be obscured. The mystics' spiritual vision spread beyond the four ells of *halakhah* and the covers of the *Tanakh*. These stories viewed the immanent spread of divine being throughout the material world — in our food, in the faces of those we love, in the trees and creatures that populate our world — as opportunities allowing for constant interaction with the Mystery of Mysteries undergirding all of reality.

A few examples are in order. According to Zoharic Kabbalah, the four blessings of the *birkat hamazon*, the blessing after eating, correspond to the four letters of the tetragrammaton — YHWH. As our blessings proceed to articulate and complete the name of God, each one successively draws blessing down into our world through those letters that stretch across the chasm spanning ultimate transcendence to divine immanence.

In his book *Sha'are Orah* (Gates of Light), the thirteenth-century kabbalist Joseph Gikatilla identifies the name *Adonai* (mentioned in Psalms 51:17 at the beginning of the statutory prayer)

with *Shekhinah*, the lowest of the ten rungs (*sefirot*) of divinity, and the word *ratson* (“will,” recited at the end of the statutory prayer from Psalms 19:15) with the topmost of the *sefirot*. Gikatilla explains that the trajectory of our prayer is a procession from the bottom to the top of God’s own being. These are not mere literary allusions, but an intimate identification with divinity itself. The conclusion of Psalms 51:17 (“that my mouth may utter Your praise”) is interpreted to mean that *Shekhinah* Herself, signified by the words “Your praise,” is what passes through our lips as we recite the Shemonah Esrei.

One Zoharic story (3:201b) relates that Rabbi Pinhas was jubilant after hearing a kabbalistic homily from Rabbi Shimon about three miraculous biblical “mouths”: the mouth of Balaam’s donkey, the mouth of the earth yawning open to swallow Korah and his band, and the mouth of Miriam’s well. All three are created miraculously by God (*Avot* 5:6) as part of the Creation of the world, a Creation that occurred through utterances from God’s mouth. Rabbi Pinchas kissed Rabbi Shim’on in gratitude, exclaiming, “Let us kiss the mouth of YHVH, aromatized with the fragrances of His garden.” Even the person teaching Torah is a vessel through whom divinity itself passes.

In an obscure homily explicating a parable in Ecclesiastes 9, the *Zohar* on Song of Songs (*Zohar Chadash* 70a) explains that both the largest letter of the alphabet, k (*lamed*), and the smallest letter, h (*yod*), are manifestations of divinity. Frequently, the *Zohar* will refer to this diminutive letter as a point, and a point, as we know from high school geometry, occupies no space. The first letter of God’s name is thus treated as literally unfathomable. This interpretation of *yod* reflects the Maimonidean impulse to stand back and reflect on God’s ineffability, mystery, and forbidding transcendence, reflecting the humble stance of self-aware human creatureliness.

The interpretation of the parable’s king as the grand letter *lamed* reflects the Zoharic intoxication with the profusion of symbols (the very opposite of awed reverence before the utterly mysterious) that entice the reader to contemplate the blessed Holy One. The kabbalists aim to satisfy two theological impulses at once: humble deference and the bold quest for intimacy.

Finally, every time a person utters a blessing, saying, “*Barukh atah Adonai*” while viewing the ineffable name YHVH on the page, one communicates that God is both immanent and transcendent; holding the two simultaneously, one speaks the unspeakable while yearning for the sublime. Maintaining this consciousness allowed the kabbalists to sustain a stance of reverence before inapprehensible divinity, even as they reinterpreted the tradition with audacious creativity. Each of these examples (of which thousands more could be invoked) shows the kabbalistic imagination at work, inviting its adherents to participate in sacramental intimacy with divinity at every turn of ritual-filled lives. As embodied beings, we humans thrive not only on the highs of spiritual ecstasy, but also on the spiritual athleticism that ritual provides. Indeed, it is only through repeated practice that one can experience the full dialectical surprise and enchantment that occur when a daily ritual is transformed. It is precisely in the tension between rote and imaginative transport that glimmers of higher purpose emerge. Decidedly not for all, a practice-rich lifestyle, I believe, may be most fruitful in helping younger Jews to feel both rooted and authentic.

Great comfort can be derived from the impossibility of certainty. When theological beliefs, reams of biblical commentary, historical arguments, and contemporary critique can all be held at the same time (like gazing at a star-filled night, replete with constellations), then one can begin to read every verse in the Torah and seek out its underlying mysteries without concern for the contradictions. The kabbalists' pious stance was anchored in traditional piety, through the observance of the vast array of Jewish ritual in its totality. Even as they acknowledged the limited manifestation of divinity present in *halakhah*, they understood that it was *only* through that dedication to the "letter" that they could arrive at its "spirit." In other words, while they constantly yearned for new openings in their relationship with the blessed Holy One, they did so in their willingness to trust, as in any long-term relationship, that searching deeper in the vastness of Jewish literature and practice would invoke the gushing flow of enlightenment and radiance. Alternatively, abandoning troubling texts could bring about only the small satisfaction of an immediate resolution of conflict. In a mystical sense, they recognized the truth that "There's no place like home."

Green asks, "Can a religion without literalist claims to divine will and dictate command the hearts of its adherents, who face tremendous assimilatory pressures...?" Drawing upon the philosopher Paul Ricoeur's notion of second naiveté — acknowledging the boat-tipping potential of historical criticism, but affiliating with religion's grand horizons nevertheless — I venture to say that having faith in the voice calling out daily from Sinai, commanding observance but giving a wide berth to mystical interpretation, can forge a path for an evolving spirituality.

This article originally appeared in the [April 2014 issue of Sh'ma, A Journal of Jewish Ideas.](#)