

*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. Rabbi Deborah Waxman, Ph.D., was among the prominent rabbis and spiritual leaders who responded to Green's call and raised their own questions and challenges.*

## Multiple Conceptualizations of the Divine

DEBORAH WAXMAN

I recently spent a Shabbat meal with a group of university students, and I found myself deeply engaged in a theological conversation. The student rabbi who serves this campus and who organized the meal is from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, where she participates in our campus track — an opportunity for students to augment their intensive Jewish studies with discussions of such matters as fostering autonomy among emerging adults and building community among an ever-shifting population.

Several trustees of the college joined us that evening. I sat with one who is secular and skeptical in orientation, and who quizzed me about Reconstructionist approaches to theology. I described transnaturalism, understanding God as *haMakom*, the wellspring of the universe and the force that infuses and ultimately surpasses all things. I explained process theology, which experiences God in the constant change and unfolding complexity of our world. I spoke about being open to immanence, and encountering the divine in the faces of our families and friends. At each juncture, he nodded in somewhat surprised recognition, shared a few engaged comments, and asked yet another question. When I made explicit that I was talking about a relationship with a nonpersonal God, expressly setting aside the idea of God as nonanthropomorphic in favor of commander or king metaphors, his energy shifted, and he tartly observed, “Well, how are you going to get anyone to do anything Jewish without those ideas? If we don't have to do them, why would we?”

Rabbi Arthur Green eloquently describes the historical context that led to the eclipse of a conception of a personal, interventionist God, and points toward one path that illuminates for some a [new rationale for intensive Jewish living](#). Green's mystical piety works for some of the rabbinical students enrolled at RRC, though it does not for others, as it would not for my conversation partner over dinner that evening. Some of our rabbinical students burn with enthusiasm to organize and work for justice; they are deeply sustained by the intersection of personal sanctity/*tzelem Elokim* and social restructuring/*tikkun olam*. Other students discern their evolving relationships with God through conversations with their spiritual directors, or in *chevruta* study with peers — through our many text classes — and with others — through our multifaith programs.

When we revised the RRC curriculum recently, our faculty returned again and again to this question: How do we train rabbinical students as effective leaders for 21st-century Jewish life? Fostering multiple approaches — in theology, in practice, in outlook — is at the foundation of our efforts and emerges from our continued commitment to the concept of Judaism as a civilization. This embrace of diversity is as relevant in our day as it was when Mordecai Kaplan formulated it in the 1930s as the founding insight of a Reconstructionist approach. Kaplan helped to create the reality of Jewish pluralism. Our students, diverse in their beliefs and

practices, are educated in a method that builds and sustains rich, substantive, and diverse expressions of Jewish life, copious approaches to meaningful Jewish living, and manifold understandings of the divine. A commitment to Jewish pluralism requires, I believe, multiple and dynamic conceptualizations of the divine.

Like Kaplan, Green seeks unifying, inspirational language for being Jewish in an open environment. Kaplan, writing in a period known as “the age of ideology,” sought to unify and inspire Jewish life in the modern era through the creation of an all-encompassing approach that would capture the American Jewish imagination. Kaplan proposed the creation of an ideology around the concept of Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people, which would at once provide a common understanding and accommodate diversity.

But we no longer live in the age of ideologies. We live in the postmodern age of pastiche, when individuals are free to pick and choose from among a rich banquet of interests and spiritual expressions, and where boundaries and identities are fluid. “Civilization” and “peoplehood,” once radical ideas coming out of Reconstructionist Judaism, have become widely accepted. While the terms continue to have resonance, they do not necessarily point toward a visionary future.

I join with Green, who asks: What next? As Green writes, many of our traditional Jewish metaphors — the building blocks of our mythology — have broken down. For example, as Reconstructionist Jews, we make explicit the break from the literal narrative of revelation at Sinai, and thus the claim of an unbroken chain of rabbinic authority emerging from that moment. So our rabbis are not *marai d’atra*, halakhic decisors. We are asking our rabbis to be compelling, without, as my dinner partner astutely observed, any of the compulsory power that the premodern myths offered. This is very challenging: We are engaged in an extended experiment of imagining Jewish leadership in a context that is both democratic and open. We ask rabbis to lead by being educators and moral leaders who serve as meaning makers, spiritual guides, and companions on Jewish journeys. They must find conceptualizations of the divine that nourish them. They must find ways to communicate this nourishment to others. And they must also be able to engage with seekers who will be sustained by other God ideas, or none at all. For many, the deepest experience of God is in the questioning and in the relationship among questioners.

For me, and for many other Reconstructionist rabbis, being Jewish means that we live lives of meaning and connection to each other, Jews and non-Jews like. Being Jewish orients us toward this kind of life, and it helps us to achieve it with Jewish tools and methods. We train our students in the rich breadth of modalities — text, liturgy, culture, and practice — used by Jews who came before us, and we support them in efforts to develop new modalities. We ask rabbinical students to engage directly in consideration of the divine, in multiple expressions — as the wellspring of the universe, the foundation of moral behavior, the locus of community, the source of all potential, and the continuous change-maker. At the same time, we urge them to remember that belief in God is not a prerequisite for and should not be a barrier to throwing one’s lot in with the Jewish people. However God is or is not experienced, Judaism aids us in becoming ethical human beings, living in partnership, and building with others a just and ethical world.

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