

# A Theology of Empathy

Rabbi Arthur Green

King Solomon, in describing the “Woman of Valor,” says of her “She is like a merchant ship, bringing her food from afar (Proverbs 31:13).” I thank you, women of valor and leaders in your great church, for choosing to bring your spiritual sustenance from so far away, bringing me all the way from Boston to Rome and, more significantly, across the chasm that separates our two sister traditions, drawn from the same source in Scripture and the prophetic word. Our traditions are separated by a great wall of blood, tears, and hardheartedness, though they come from a single root. That wall has been breached in recent decades, partly by the memory of the many members of women’s orders who risked their lives to save Jewish children during the dark night that fell upon us on this continent, but also by the great change of heart ushered in by Vatican II and the spirit of Pope John XXIII, may his memory be blessed. As a non-Catholic, I pray for the day of his canonization. I am prepared to pray for a long time.

I come before you today as a teacher, a teacher of teachers. I have devoted much of my life to the education of rabbis, having served as president of one seminary and then as founder of another. I firmly believe that Judaism, one of the world’s great religious traditions, still has much to offer, both to its own adherents and to the universal community of seekers. That wisdom, the inner light hidden within our Torah, needs to be sought out, discovered, updated, and rendered accessible by newly trained rabbis, as it has been passed on throughout the generations. This is the work in which I am engaged.

I do this work from a particular point of view. Although I do not belong to any of the well-known denominations within Judaism, I think of myself as a neo-Hasidic Jew. This means that I study and am inspired by the teachings of Hasidism, our great movement of popular piety that began in Eastern Europe, founded by disciples of the Ba’al Shem Tov, Rabbi Israel Master of the Good Name, who passed into eternity 250 years ago this month.

Hasidism teaches a radically simplified version of Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition. It emphasizes that “the whole earth is filled with God’s glory (Is. 6:3),” in the words of the prophet, that God can be found in each place and in every moment. The purpose of tradition, prayer, and ritual, is to help us open our hearts to that presence. When we do so, we are able to uplift and redeem fallen sparks of divine light that are within us and all around us, restoring them to their source in the One.

*Neo-Hasidism* differs from classical Hasidism, which still exists and thrives, in two important ways. We do not share the Hasidic disdain for modernity, especially for modern education and science. We accept the legitimacy of scientific and historical investigation and believe that faith must be updated in response to it. We also do not believe that the insights of Hasidism should apply or be limited only to Jews. Its teachings are about God and the human spirit, expressed in many different languages

across our vast human community. We seek a Judaism that recognizes its place within that wondrous and colorful spectrum, not one that seeks to stand outside or above it. My visit to you here is in that spirit.

We modern rabbis minister to a people who are fairly secular in their daily lives. They do not spend much time either talking to God or talking about God. Yet there is about them a quality of deep search for meaning, even if they cannot articulate this in classical religious language. They want to understand their lives as having some purpose. They have a strong sense that we are supposed to help make the world a better place, to lessen human suffering, and increase goodness among people. It is not accidental that names of Jews are found among every group that defends human rights and works to reduce human suffering; we still remember that we were slaves in Egypt. This memory, reinforced by more recent ones, causes us to care for the oppressed and suffering, wherever they may be. The sense of family and intergenerational connection also remains very strong. Jews, even those of seemingly little faith or Jewish knowledge, believe that we have a valuable legacy that we have been given by our ancestors and that we must pass on to our children's children. Many struggle to understand what this legacy is, but they still seek to pass something of it onward.

It is especially around the life-cycle and this sense of legacy that Jews find themselves turning to rabbis and synagogue communities. The birth of a child, education in the tradition, celebration of life's milestones, tragic losses of life or misfortune, the aging and illness of parents, death and mourning – all of these bring Jews back from their secular pursuits to seek out wisdom and consolation from their tradition, and the personal support and affection of rabbis and other clergy.

Rabbis are expected to meet Jews in such moments with empathy, drawing on a deep well of caring, having an ability to give and to be present to people with whom they otherwise may have little relationship. At such times the traditional phrases of piety do not suffice, nor does the attempt at purely intellectual teaching. The rabbi has to be seen, above all, as genuine, truly caring, and not merely professional. As you know well, this ability to be present can only come out of your own spiritual life. To live a life of giving to others, you need to be nourished by God's presence in your own life. To *hold* people, in their pain as well as in their joy, you as a rabbi (or a priest, or a sister) have to manifest your own strength, which is really not your own at all, but God's, in which you are rooted by your own faith.

So teaching students to become rabbis, to help each one grow into his or her own rabbinate, as we like to say it, includes instructing them on how to cultivate their own inner garden. This includes prayer, both communal and personal. Spiritual direction and counseling also have a place in our program. But in our tradition the inner life is also very much nurtured by study of the sources, taught and discussed in open-hearted ways, so that each rabbi's spiritual life is rooted directly in the text and language of the ages. Please remember that in our tradition the Word that was with God from the beginning did not become flesh, but remains Word, manifest in Torah, which includes the ongoing process of teaching, learning, and the constant creativity of new interpretations. The *bet*

*midrash* or study hall, where students sit in pairs or small groups and discuss texts among themselves, lies at the heart of rabbinic education.

But what is the theology that ties all this together? Where do we turn for a language that calls forth this deep sense of our shared humanity and encourages us to open ourselves to one another? I am talking about a theology of empathy, an understanding of God that sets our love and caring for one another at the very center of our religious journey. There is no faith in God I call authentic that does not lead us to care for and act for the most needy of God's creatures. But how do we say this in the context of a contemporary Judaism? I would like to take you into the heart of this quest for language, which will also be a journey into the heart of Jewish faith as it exists today.

We can begin nowhere else but with *Shema' Yisra'el*, "Hear O Israel, Y-H-W-H our God, Y-H-W-H is One. (Please note that I spell out the letters of God's name, which we are not permitted to pronounce.) This Biblical verse (Deut. 6:4) stands as our watchword of faith, recited by the pious twice each day, "when you lie down and when you rise up."

The best-known of all Jewish prayers, *Shema' Yisra'el*, is in fact not a prayer at all. Prayer is an act in which the human being turns toward God. Its essence lies in an opening of the heart; prayer is indeed called by the early rabbis "Worship within the heart." It usually, but by no means always, has a verbal component, addressed to the Almighty. The most characteristic Jewish prayers are called *berakhot* or "blessings," opening with the phrase "Blessed are You O Lord...". But this line is rather addressed to the community, rather than to God. Now I will translate more fully: "Hear O Israel" -- "Listen, my fellow-Jews!" "Being is our God; Being is one!"

I am going to return later to the word "Israel" in this line, because that is an essential part of our conversation. But let me begin here with the functional question, the big question when it comes to reality: What difference does monotheism make? One god, ten gods, a thousand, so what? Jews (we are most like Muslims in this regard) insist on the absolute oneness of God and take pride in the "purity" of our monotheism. But why should we? What is monotheism worth?

The only value of monotheism is to make you realize that all being, including every creature – and that means the rock and the blade of grass in your garden as well as your pet lizard and your human neighbor next door – are all one in origin. You come from the same place. You were created in the same great act of love. God takes delight in each form that emerges and bestows God's own grace upon it. Therefore – and this is the "payoff" line, the only one that really counts: *Treat them that way!* They are all God's creatures; they exist only because of the divine presence, the same divine presence that makes you exist. This realization calls upon you *to get to know them! Get to love them!* Discover the unique divine gift within each of them! Live in amazement at the divine light strewn throughout the world. That's what it means to be a religious human being.

Within the human community, that love also means respect for difference and for boundaries. The mystical spirit that seeks to overcome all distance and separation

between God's children cannot become an excuse for ignoring boundaries. Respecting otherness is easy to forget in a religious context. It sometimes happens to good and well-meaning people that they are so overpowered by the love within them that they lose control, discovering that the boundaries between *agape* and *eros* are not so firm as they had thought them to be. Love and self-restraint, the right and left hands of God, need to be properly balanced, within the cosmos as within the self.

I realize that it might be more polite for a visitor to be silent about painful and embarrassing matters taking place within your own family. But I have decided that it would be even more insensitive to remain silent. As a friend of your great church I mourn with you for the pain of all the victims, including the priests, whose lives have been so ruined by energies that got so deeply out of balance. If I am here to speak of empathy, I must first express empathy for the pain and loss felt by Catholics around the world in these recent years and months. That includes empathy for all those who have been harmed by abuse and inappropriate behavior, empathy for all those misled into thinking they could hide from themselves or from God behind the veil of attempted celibacy, and empathy for all the many hurt by confusion, doubt, and loss of faith. I pray that God be with you in the work of healing, healing the lives of individuals and healing the deeply wounded church itself. How ironic that you women, who had so little to do with the causing of this crisis, so much of it having to do with men and male psychology, will have so great a hand in the process of its healing. Indeed, I also pray that the church learn from this something about how greatly the wisdom and leadership of women is needed to right these balances that seem so hard for so many men, both in the church and throughout our world.

Now I return to the controversial part of my translation. The mystical tradition within Judaism, out of which I speak, insists on translating God's name as "Being." That is Y-H-W-H, the Hebrew name for God, the one we look at on the page but don't dare to pronounce. Scripture tells us (Ex. 6:2-3) that this is God's own name. But really it's not a name at all, not even fully a noun. Y-H-W-H is an impossible conflation of all the tenses of the verb "to be" in Hebrew: HYH, meaning "was;" HWH, indicating the present, and YHYH, "will be." They are all put together here is an impossible form. Probably it should best be translated as "Was-Is-Will Be." But since that's a little awkward to say each time, "Being" is the best we can do, though we must understand that "Being" as transcending time as well as space.

The meaning here is profound. "God" and existence are not separable from one another. God is not some Fellow over there who created a separate, distinct entity called "world" over here. There are not two; there is only one. The mystics insist on carrying monotheism one step farther than some others do.

To say you believe in one God, but then depict that God as an old fellow with a beard seated on a throne – or in any other single way, taken literally – is just a concentrated form of idolatry. It's like that old story every Jewish child learns, in which Abraham's father Terah is the owner of an idol workshop. Once he needed to go out and asked his son to mind the store. Abraham smashed all the idols but the biggest one, then put an axe

in the large idol's hand. When Terah returned, he looked around and said, quite in shock, "What happened to all my gods?" Abraham answered: "The largest idol smashed them all." "Don't be silly," said Terah, "they're just idols." "Aha!" said Abraham, and that "Aha!" is supposed to be the beginning of monotheism.

But what if there is something important being said beneath the surface here? How do we know that our one God is not just the biggest idol? If monotheism is just about numbers, all you've got left is a single big idol. Far too many people leave it at that. The real change has to be in the way you see existence itself. In fact the way you say "existence" in Hebrew is HWYH, pronounced *Havvayah*, the four letters of God's secret name, just re-arranged. To see "God" when you look at existence is a re-arranging of the molecules, as it were. Seeing the BIG picture instead of the many smaller ones. God is Being when you see Being as one, when you see the whole picture. Of course we can't ever really see *all* of that big picture. The sum is infinitely more than the totality of its parts. Transcendent mystery remains, even in my very immanentist theology. But for me transcendence resides *within* immanence. Transcendence does not refer to a God who dwells "out there" somewhere, on the far side of the universe (which has no sides, the astronomers assure us!). Transcendence means that God is *here*, present in this very moment, in a way so intense and profound that we could never fathom it. *That* is the mystery.

This is the secret truth. Listen to one of the great sages, a Hasidic master who revealed in a letter he wrote to his children and grandchildren. Here I quote the famous Sefat Emet, the rabbi of Ger or Gora Kalwarya in Poland:

The proclamation that we declare each day in saying *Shema' Yisra'el* needs to be understood as it truly is...the meaning of "Y-H-W-H is one" is not that He is the only God, negating other gods (though that too is true), but the meaning is deeper than that. There is no being other than Him...Everything that exists in the world, spiritual and physical, is God Himself...Because of this, every person can attach himself to God wherever he is, through the holiness that exists within every single thing, even corporeal things. You only have to be negated in the spark of holiness...This is the foundation of all the mystical teachings in the world.

Of course that is not so easy as it sounds. To "be negated in the spark of holiness," in order to make room for God's Self to enter, is a lifelong labor. To do this inner work in a healthy and wholesome way is a goal toward which we all struggle.

'But now I have to turn back to the beginning of our non-prayer. "Hear O Israel." Who are "Israel" in this phrase? Remember where the word comes from. Our ancestor Jacob once had an all-night wrestling match with an angel. A tough fellow, that Jacob. Even an angel couldn't best him. When dawn came, the angel said: "Let me go! Time to sing God's praises!" "Uh-uh," Jacob said, "not until you bless me." So Jacob came out of that encounter with a new name: Israel, meaning "Struggler with God."

I believe that name belongs to all strugglers, not just to Jews and not just to Christians. Everyone who wrestles with angels, who struggles to make sense out of life, is part of some broader community called "Israel." *Shema' Yisra'el, Y-H-W-H Eloheinu, Y-H-W-H ehad* then means: "Listen, all you who struggle, all you who wrestle with life's meaning! Being is our God, Being is one!" Don't look beyond the stars. No need to stretch your neck. God is right here, filling all of existence with endless bounty. Open your eyes. Turn that wrestling match into an embrace. Find God's presence in the unified, transforming vision of all that is.

"Hear O Israel" is followed immediately by "You shall love Y-H-W-H your God with all your heart, with all our soul, and with all your might." This is one of the two great statements of love in the Torah that Jesus has told you constitute the essence of its teachings. Our sages have struggled for many centuries over the question of how it is possible to command love, if this is indeed a commandment. Does love not require spontaneity? Does it not spring up voluntarily from the heart? But when the *shema'* is recited in the context of our daily liturgy, it is always preceded by a declaration of God's love for us. In our daily morning prayers we say: "How greatly have You loved us, pouring upon us the bountiful flow of Your compassion;" and in the evening: "With eternal love have You loved the House of Israel, Your people." We are thus first reminded of God's love for us, and then call out the oneness of all being. At that point, we no longer need to be "commanded" to love. The love wells up from within us as response, as natural and essential to us as breathing or as speech itself. In this case the proper translation into English is no longer "You *shall* love Y-H-W-H your God..." but rather "You *will* love...", statement of fact rather than commandment.

Can the same apply to that other love prescribed by the Torah: "Love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18)?" Can that love too become so natural that we no longer need to experience it as "commanded," but as welling up from within? For a Jewish response to this question, we have to turn to a famous debate between two of the early rabbis, living about a century after Jesus, Rabbi Akiva, also a martyr to the Romans, and his friend Ben Azzai. The Talmud records that they struggled over the question: "What is the most basic principle of Torah?" What is the teaching for the sake of which all the rest of Judaism exists? Akiva had a ready answer: "Love your neighbor as yourself (Lev.19:18)." Akiva was Judaism's greatest advocate for the path of love, though perhaps I should say that he shares this honor with Jesus of Nazareth. Akiva was the one who insisted that the Song of Songs was indeed to be included in sacred Scripture, calling it the "Holy of Holies," spoken by God and Israel at Mount Sinai. The tale of Rabbi Akiva and his wife's love is one of the few truly romantic tales within rabbinic literature. So too the account of Akiva's death: when he was being tortured by the Romans, he supposedly said: "Now I understand the commandment to love God with all your soul -- even if He takes your soul, you shall love Him." Thus it is no surprise that Akiva is depicted as seeing love to be the most basic rule of Torah.

But Ben Azzai disagreed. He said: I have a greater principle than yours. He quoted Genesis 5:1-2: "On the day when God made human beings, they were made in the likeness of God; male and female God created them." That, he said, is Torah's most basic

principle. *Every* human being is God's image, Ben Azzai says to Akiva. Some are easier to love, some are harder. Some days you can love them, some days you can't. But you still have to recognize and treat them all as the image of God. Love is too shaky a pedestal on which to stand the entire Torah. It is too dangerous to base the world on the commandment to love. Perhaps Ben Azzai also saw that Akiva's principle might be narrowed, conceived only in terms of your own community. "Your *neighbor*," after all, might refer just to your fellow-Jew. Or your fellow Catholic. Or your fellow in piety, in good behavior. How about the stranger? The sinner? How about your enemy? Ben Azzai's principle leaves no room for exceptions, since it goes back to Creation itself. It's not just "your kind of people" who were created in God's image, but everyone.

Once we have a basic principle, or even a set of basic principles, we have a standard by which to evaluate all other rules and practices, teachings and theological ideas. Does this particular idea or teaching lead us closer to seeing the divine in every person? Might this interpretation of our Scripture be an obstacle toward doing so? Could we interpret it differently, in a way more in line with our basic principle? Here lies an inner Jewish basis for raising some important questions, one that should be more in use among those who shape our *halakhah* and your canon law for our day. I take the *kelal gadol*, the basic principle, to mean "that for which all the rest exists," the animating principle behind our entire religious life. In that case, any Judaism that veers from the ongoing work of helping us allow every human being to become and be seen as God's image in the fullest way possible is a distortion of our religion. That ongoing challenge requires us in each generation *to widen the circle* of those seen by us as fully human, as bearing God's image, as we seek to expand the bounds of the holy. *As we find God's image in ever more of humanity, we open ourselves to ever more of God's presence.* To find God in every human being is no small task. We could spend a lifetime at it and still not perfect this art, but I call upon you to join me in it.

Judaism's moral voice begins with Creation. Our most essential teaching, that for the sake of which Judaism still needs to exist, is our insistence that each human being is the unique image of God. "Why was Adam created singly?" asks the Mishnah. "So that no person might say: 'My father was greater than yours.'" "How great is the Creator! A human king has coins stamped out in a press and each one looks alike. But God stamps us all out in the imprint of Adam, and no two human beings are the same!" Each of us humans is needed as God's image and can be replaced by no other. It's as simple as that.

"Why are graven images forbidden by the Torah?" I once heard my great teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel ask. Why is the Torah so concerned with idolatry? You might think that it is because God has no image, and any image of God is therefore a distortion. But Heschel read the commandment differently. "No," he said, "it is precisely because God *has* an image that idols are forbidden. *You* are the image of God. But the only way you can shape that image is by using *the medium of your entire life*. To take anything less than a full, living, breathing human being and try to create God's image out of it - that diminishes the divine and is considered idolatry." You can't *make* God's image; you can only *be* God's image.

Now I return to the question of empathy. To undergird empathy, you now see, I offer a theology where otherness is not quite absolute. Ultimately, we are all of the One, embodiments of the same divine presence. Behind the mask of the other lies the oneness of the Maker reflected in the deed. Empathy means *both* embracing each of us in our diversity *and* seeing through to our oneness.

You have a great language for this in your tradition, that of Corpus Christi. We speak of the image, or even the body, of Adam that embraces us all. But some confusion arises around these concepts. Does the language of Corpus Christi include only those inside the church or does it embrace the entire human community, indeed the entire world? Of course that is a question for your theologians to answer, not for me. But we have a different version of the same problem. We remain a distinct people, an ethnic entity, as well as a community of faith. We insist that we can be both at once. But then how exclusive are we? Our prayers are filled with appeals to God to bless us “and the whole people Israel.” Do we pray only for ourselves? What about the rest of humanity? Do we pray for them as well?

For many centuries, Judaism has not been an evangelical tradition. In large part because of Christianity’s success and the fact that Christian and Islamic regimes forbade conversion to Judaism, we have not worked to bring our tradition to others, but have concentrated on our own survival. Yet our concerns remain universal. We want all humanity not to embrace Judaism, but to live by our most essential truths: the oneness of God and the faith that each of us, every person on earth, bears God’s image. This is our message for humanity.

This is the great struggle within Judaism today. How wide is our circle of empathy, of compassion? Can we open the doors of our hearts widely enough to include the whole human family, even the larger family of natural beings, within it, without losing our distinctive sense of history and ethnic identity? Can the special love I have for members of my own community be a love that encourages me to open further, to embrace ever wider circles in love? Or does it necessarily close me off from others, creating a circle of exclusiveness, to which most of humanity remains outside?

We Jews and Christians are the spiritual descendents of the prophets, who were religious revolutionaries. They needed to stand up firmly for the uniqueness of their message. The God in whose name they spoke was *entirely different* from anything worshipped in the pagan world. They mocked the gods of the heathen. “Eyes have they, but they see not; ears have they, but they hear not... Like them are those who make them and all those who trust in them. Israel, trust in Y-H-W-H (Ps. 115:5, 8-9).” The nations of the ancient world each had their own gods. Thus they saw themselves as separate from one another, having little concern for the outsider. In proclaiming one God, the prophets also spoke for one world and one human family. That demanded true concern for the other, who is not entirely “:other” after all.

Like all revolutions, this one created a complex legacy. It claimed that we alone stood for the truth. "Israel," in this Psalm, are those who trust in Y-H-W-H, none others. When the church claimed to inherit this mantle, becoming a "new Israel," it also inherited this shadow-side of exclusivism. Yes, Christianity broke down the ethnic walls; all peoples were welcomed into the new church. But it replaced the ethnic walls with theological or ritual walls; Christendom became the community of the baptized or those who shared a specifically defined faith.

We both need to struggle with that legacy of exclusivism. You may blame ancient Israel and its prophets for having started it, but the church inherited it and raised the stakes, until we Jews too were seen as outsiders. But it is too late now for all this. The world has become too small. We all live side by side with one another, and the need is too urgent. We need to work side by side in facing the great challenges before us. These include the degradation of the human spirit in our profane modern culture, the endless lure of selfish materialism and the great injustices it engenders, and the very preservation of our planet itself as a home for higher forms of life. All these are the real work of religious people and communities, and we must be united to facing them. To do this, we need to go back to "Y-H-W-H is one" and the demand for universal love that it implies. This represents the teaching of both of our traditions at its best.

For us Jews, the struggle over exclusivism touches another matter that lies close to our hearts. I speak to you in the decade when the last survivors of our terrible Holocaust are about to end their time here on earth, the moment when their tortured memory of suffering will turn into "mere" history. We struggle daily with the question of the Holocaust's legacy, the murder of one third of our people and the destruction of so many cultural and spiritual resources. What are we to learn from that terrible event? We do not believe that God visited it upon us; we believe it was the doing of human evil. But still, we must learn from it, we must seek God's message, there as everywhere. Many Jews feel that the message is clear. "Never again!" means that Jewish blood is not cheap. We will defend ourselves, take pre-emptory action against our enemies, and never allow Jews to be victims. But the best among the survivors, including both Heschel and, may he be blessed with long life, Elie Wiesel, have understood "Never again!" to mean that never again will we permit genocide *anywhere* in our single human family, that we, as genocide's survivors, will stand up for all who suffer. History has not made it easy for us to do that, as you know. But we were never promised that it would be easy.

Your church made great strides in openness of spirit, partly in response to that same terrible event. The spirit of Vatican II, and especially the words of *Nostra Aetate*, gave us all much hope that the truest catholicity or universality of your faith was being given full expression. Many of us, including myself, learned from and were inspired by your church's ability to repent, to grow, and to change, while remaining faithful to your own identity. I urge you with my whole heart to continue in the path of that growth, not to compromise it in your hearts or in your teaching. I promise you that I, along with a host of my colleagues and students, present and future rabbis, struggle alongside you to read our own tradition also as one of universal human embrace. We need each other, we people of faith, to do the work of healing and repair that our communities, each in its own

way, so desperately need. Let us help and support one another in this work. Let us not be divided by the burden of too much history or ancient claims of exclusive access to God's kingdom. That kingdom includes all of being, with all our differences, embracing us all.