

GOD
TORAH
ISRAEL

*Traditionalism
Without
Fundamentalism*

LOUIS JACOBS

THE GUSTAVE A. AND MAMIE W. EFROYMSON
MEMORIAL LECTURES
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THE GUSTAVE A. AND MAMIE W. EFROYMSON
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God, Torah, Israel

Traditionalism Without Fundamentalism

LOUIS JACOBS

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*For Dr. Ian Gordon
Faithful Physician and Good Friend*

Preface

IT WAS WITH a considerable degree of trepidation that I agreed, at the kind invitation of the Efroymsen Committee, to deliver three lectures on the kind of theme of which the talmudic Rabbis suggest silence is golden. That I did, nevertheless, undertake this daunting task was in obedience to that other talmudic advice on etiquette: "Do not be diffident when great men invite you." The resultant lectures are now presented in print, with fairly extensive footnotes, although the form of verbal communication has been preserved wherever possible.

The position adopted in these lectures is somewhat akin to what German Jewish scholars have called "Orthopraxy" rather than "Orthodoxy" and is that adopted more or less by the Breslau school. I have tried to show, however, that such a position should not result in the attitude that one may believe what one likes as long as the mitzvot are observed. Behaviorism is no substitute for theological thinking. To believe what one likes is a purely emotional response in which the truth content of faith is ignored. A better formulation is to be open to new knowledge and to base one's belief on this openness without it leading to a negative stance towards the mitzvot. Hence I subtitle these lectures "Traditionalism Without Fundamentalism."

My thesis in these lectures is that the basic components of Judaism—God, the Torah, and Israel—are best accepted in their traditional formulations and have far greater significance for Jewish religious life in such a framework. On the other hand, I do not believe the Jewish tradition to be infallible. Obviously, in the light of modern thought, whole areas of the tradition require radical revision if congruity with the rest of our present-day knowledge is to be maintained, to say nothing of the question of whether there is

such a concept as *the* Jewish tradition, a "normative Judaism" at the bar of which all truth and all values are obliged to stand. My attempt is to explore the parameters of reinterpretation and to define how far one may step before one proceeds outside Judaism altogether and virtually adopts a different religious philosophy.

Every Jewish theologian, reflecting on how the challenges to his faith are to be met, must achieve a balance between the truth claims of both the old and the new. He is helped by a kind of consensus that has emerged among committed Jews throughout the ages. With regard to Christianity and Islam, for example, it is the consensus of the believing community that has refused to allow anyone to suggest that Judaism's daughter religions can ever be seen as Judaism through a process of reinterpretation. It is acknowledged that while Jews for Jesus may still retain their halakhic status as Jews, by no stretch of the imagination can they be considered Jews professing the Jewish religion. On another level, I argue that to understand Judaism in naturalistic terms—in which God is the name given to the force that makes for righteousness, in which the Torah is a totally human composition, and in which the Jewish people is not chosen because there is no personal God to do the choosing—is similarly to go beyond the legitimate boundaries of a traditional Jewish theology. Nowadays, however, there is no clear consensus in this matter. Many religious Jews have opted for naturalism and consider the supernaturalistic approach to be reactionary or bordering on the superstitious. Nonetheless, I defend religious supernaturalism, which, I believe, is gradually coming into its own again after its partial eclipse and which to me is the most cogent and convincing picture of Judaism, superior both logically and theologically to its naturalistic rival.

A special difficulty attends on delivering theological lectures in an institute of higher Jewish learning. Not a trace of dogmatism need or should arise in a lecture of pure Jewish scholarship. One can safely leave aside one's own predilections when discussing the structure of the talmudic *sugya* or the historical Baal Shem Tov. A lecturer on topics such as these is not required to be personally

involved. He need not accept the binding religious nature of the Talmud in the first instance, and there is certainly no need for him to be a Hasid in the second. If he has the knowledge to tackle these subjects, he need not be a Jew at all in order to carry his arguments to a successful conclusion. Theology, on the other hand, by its very nature demands personal commitment. The theologian not only describes what his coreligionists have believed in the past; he proclaims what he personally believes as a current member of the faith community. Complete objectivity is neither possible nor desirable in this area. I must consequently declare at the outset that I believe in religious supernaturalism and am not acting as an advocate for a case I am really convinced is weak. I shall do my best to be fair to the other side and even try to be objective, while trying not to delude myself that such objectivity is entirely possible in matters upon which persons of good will on both sides have strong opinions.

My thanks are due to the Hebrew Union College Press for the great care with which they have seen my book through to publication. I am especially grateful to Barbara Selya for her excellent copyediting and sympathetic understanding.

Belief in a Personal *GOD*
The Position of Liberal Supernaturalism

AT THE BEGINNING of this century in the United States, debate raged furiously in Protestant circles between liberals and fundamentalists. The liberals, accepting the findings of biblical criticism and the conclusions of modern science, held that the Bible could no longer be seen as completely accurate and infallible and that, consequently, the whole question of divine inspiration needed to be reconsidered in the light of the new knowledge. The fundamentalists retorted that the inerrancy of Scripture is a *fundamental*, to jettison which is to abandon the faith completely. In traditional Judaism, this position takes a slightly different turn: It has been argued that there cannot be a Jewish fundamentalism since traditional Judaism does not take the Bible literally; this is a mere quibble, however, in that then the rabbinic interpretation is adopted in a fundamentalistic way. Unless you believe, Jewish fundamentalists declare, that God conveyed directly to Moses that interpretation of the Bible found in rabbinic literature, you might as well reject Judaism in toto. For reasons to be considered in the lecture on Torah, most modern Jews reject this understanding of revelation. But it by no means follows that those who accept the liberal approach to revelation cannot believe in a God who reveals Himself. I shall argue that there is nothing in modern thought to demand the rejection of the traditional theistic view that God is a real Being, involved in nature but other than and beyond nature. *Liberal*

supernaturalism is that attitude which affirms the being and transcendence of a personal God while remaining open to the fresh insights regarding the manner in which God becomes manifest in the universe He has created.¹

Israel Zangwill once said of the ancient Rabbis that while they were the most religious of men they had no word for religion. Of the Jewish religious thinkers in the premodern age (before the French Revolution and Jewish Emancipation), it can similarly be said that, while they undoubtedly believed in a personal God, they had no word for "person." To be sure, the medieval thinkers, in particular, had a highly sophisticated and extremely abstract conception of the Deity: they preferred, in Pascal's famous terminology, "the God of the philosophers" to "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." For all their stress on God's ineffability, however, they too believed that God really *is*. As the medieval thinkers—Jewish, Christian and Moslem alike—discussed God in the vocabulary they had adopted from the Greeks, He is both transcendent and immanent, in space and time and yet beyond space and time, His essence defying any attempt at comprehension, yet capable of human apprehension through His manifestation, the glory of which fills the universe. Of course, no one who thinks of God as a person is unaware that personhood is associated with the human condition and is totally inappropriate when applied to God; but then, so is all human language. The description of God as personal is meant to imply that there is a Being (this term, too, is totally inadequate) by whom we were brought into existence and whom we encounter and who encounters us. To affirm that God is a person, or, better, not less than a person, is to affirm that He is more than a great idea the emergence of which, like the invention of the wheel and of writing and the discovery of electricity, has shaped civilization.²

What are the causes of the decline in theistic belief—that is, belief in a personal God? Ever since the Renaissance, human ingenuity has tended to replace a God-centered universe with a

universe the center of which is man. The existence of God has, as a consequence, not been so much denied as it has been considered increasingly irrelevant to a world which is constantly reminded of *mankind's* impressive achievements in art, literature, music, science, and technology. At the same time, the religious mind, always in need of the transcendence that only theism can satisfy, has begun to be haunted by a terrible question: What if theism, desirable though it may be, is not true? Once Darwin offered an explanation of how species developed by the process of natural selection, once astronomers uncovered the vastnesses of a universe in which our whole solar system is no more than a speck in outer space, once Marx pointed to the economic motivation behind religious belief and Freud to the possibility that religion is a collective neurosis, belief in the God who cares for each individual has become highly problematical.³

Some religious thinkers, notably Paul Tillich and the "Death of God" theologians on the Christian scene, Mordecai Kaplan and his Reconstructionist school on the Jewish, reluctant to allow victory to the bleak philosophy of atheism, have argued that the only way to meet the challenge is to give up not the idea of theism but the understanding of God as a divine person. Yes, these thinkers concede, after Darwin and the others, it is impossible to believe in the God who creates and fashions, who intervenes in the affairs of the universe, who loves His creatures and listens to their prayers, who can endow the human soul with immortality, and who can guarantee that evil will ultimately be vanquished. That personal God, they maintain, is dead because, we now see, He never existed in the first place. But if God is understood as the power in the universe that makes for righteousness, if belief in God means that, by faith, we affirm that the universe is so constituted that goodness will ultimately win out, then God, far from being dead, is truly alive, the most vital reality for the enrichment and ennoblement of human life.⁴

For Jewish thinkers who espouse this doctrine of naturalism, prayer and ritual are still of the highest value.⁵ Prayer is not, however, an exercise in trying to beseech an undecided deity to grant our desires; it is, rather, a reaching out to the highest in the universe and in ourselves. In the life of prayer, our attention is called to the eternal values and this, in itself, makes their realization in our lives more feasible. Similarly, the Jewish rituals are still mitzvot and serve the same purpose as prayer. They link our individual strivings to the strivings of the Jewish people towards the fullest realization of the Jewish spirit. Even for the naturalist, then, the mitzvot are divine commands, but these commands arise from the experiences of the Jewish people in its long collective trek through history rather than as the dictates of a divine lawgiver.

This attitude should be treated with respect: In the past it has saved many Jews from abandoning a religious outlook on life, and many today still find it the only tenable approach to Judaism in the modern world. It cuts across the usual divisions in Jewish life, with devotees in the Orthodox as well as in the Conservative and Reform movements—though Orthodox Jews are less likely to admit openly to it. The trouble with religious naturalism, however, is that it does not deliver what it promised, a God capable of being worshiped. How can a vague belief that there is a mindless something “out there” be a real substitute for the traditional theistic belief that there is Mind behind and in the universe? The appeal of theism in its traditional form lies precisely in this, that the universe makes sense because it has an Author who continues to guide and watch over His creatures. The traditional argument for the existence of God—pointing to the evidence of order and design in the universe as proof that there is a Master Designer—provides powerful support for the liberal supernaturalist's position but has no weight at all as an argument for naturalism.⁶ Indeed, how can one sustain the conviction that there really exists the supposed power that makes for

righteousness in the world when, based on the naturalistic premise itself, that power is mindless?

The advocates of religious naturalism, influenced by science, appear to imagine that to describe God as an impersonal force or power is more philosophically respectable today than to think of Him as a person. Is it? As the medieval thinkers never tired of saying, all human descriptions of God are really inadmissible; yet since the object of worship, to be worshiped, has to produce some picture in the mind, it is necessary to use halting human language, the only language we have, always with the proviso that the reality is infinitely more than anything we dare utter. We must perforce use in our description terms taken from the highest in our experience and then add "and infinitely more than this." A force or power, precisely because it is impersonal and hence mindless, is inferior in every way to the human personality. To use the demolition job done by the scientists as a reason for preferring the force or power metaphor is to overlook the obvious fact that scientists themselves operate through their human minds. Of course, from one point of view, it is absurd to speak of God as a *person*, a term laden with all too human associations. But it is even more absurd to speak of God as an *It*, which is what speaking of Him as a force or power involves. William Temple was on surer grounds, philosophically and religiously, when he said that to speak of God as *He* is to say that *He* is more than a *He* but not less. An *It*, however, is less than a *He*.

Here it can be objected, is not to take such a position to ignore the real challenges that have been presented to traditional theism? Is it not a cowardly retreat into fundamentalism? No so. Your fundamentalist does not face the challenge: He simply denies that there is one. For him, the evolutionists were wrong; the findings of the astronomers were known all along to the Rabbis; Freud's contention that religion has its origin in the irrational fears of primitive man was an "illusion," as is the notion that there has ever been such a creature as primitive man. The liberal supernaturalist, on the other hand, has an open

mind on the question of how the idea of God came into the human mind and will be prepared to acknowledge that often a religious outlook is no more than wishful thinking. He will, moreover, make the additional distinction between the question of whether God exists and the very different question, If God exists, what are the mechanics He uses? On the question of the mechanics, for example, Darwin and Freud may well be right. Who are we to say that God, in His infinite wisdom, did not choose these and other great thinkers as His instruments to convey to other humans the way in which He works?

The failure to consider both of these questions has led to a soulless scienticism. Freud, for example, was convinced that God does not exist and that religion is an illusion. Since there is no God, Freud asked, how did the idea that there is one come into the human mind? And since belief in God is an illusion, why does it persist among the human race? That the theist denies that there is any cogency to Freud's basic premise does not mean that he must reject the ensuing Freudian explanations. If he becomes convinced by what Freud had to say, he will go on to conclude that, thanks to Freud's insight, we now have a better understanding of how God chose to make Himself known in the infancy of the human race and how He uses man's natural fears in a hostile environment to cause man to rely on God as his sole refuge.

Rabbi A.I. Kook in his essay "The Pangs of Cleansing" holds that the believer ought not to be too disturbed by attacks on his belief. These attacks are often directed against crude notions of deity which all but the most naive believers do not themselves entertain. When believers are tempted to adopt unworthy and unrefined ideas about God, the atheistic attacks, by exposing the crudities, pull the believers back.⁷ This *via negativa*, the negation from the idea of God of anthropomorphic associations, has respectable antecedents in Jewish thought, and we can now look at these. What must be said at the outset, however, is that the way of negation is very different from the reductionism of

the religious naturalists. The way of negation affirms that we know nothing and can say nothing about God's essence. At the same time, however, it also affirms that the unknown God can be apprehended in His manifestation. For the reductionist, on the other hand, what the supernaturalist sees as God's manifestation *is* God—that is to say, there is no Being manifesting Himself in creation.

Maimonides and other medieval thinkers have developed the idea of negative attributes. Regarding God's essential attributes, those of existence, wisdom, and unity, one can only speak in negative terms. Thus to say that God exists is not to say anything about His actual nature for that is unknowable. All it means—a very big *all*—is that He is not nonexistent, that there really is an unknowable God. Similarly, to say that God is wise is to say that whatever else He is He is not ignorant. And to say that He is One is to negate multiplicity from His Being.⁸ There is a real difficulty here, however. Logically, what difference is there between negating a negation and a positive affirmation? The two are surely the same. It would seem that the issue for the medieval thinkers is not so much a matter of semantics as it is a matter of psychological need.⁹ To pray to God, the worshiper must have some picture of God in his mind. As we have argued, the most effective picture is drawn from human personality, the most significant construct available to man in his universe. But the picture in the mind must never be accepted as the reality; the mental reservation must always be present. As the famous Kabbalist Moses Cordovero puts it: "The mind of the worshiper must run to and fro, running to affirm that God is (and for this the picture is essential) and then immediately recoiling lest the mental picture be imagined to be all that is affirmed."¹⁰

The Kabbalists speak of God as He is in Himself as *En Sof*, "That which has no limits."¹¹ Of this aspect of deity nothing at all can be said. Even the way of negation is impermissible when applied to *En Sof*. This does not mean that the Kabbalists

believe in two gods, one revealed, the other hidden. *Deus absconditus* is *Deus revelatus*.

The liberal supernaturalist will not, of course, consider himself necessarily bound to accept the formulations of Maimonides or of the Kabbalists. Because he has a liberal approach, he will tend to see these and similar formulations in historical terms—that is, as conditioned by the thought patterns of the age in which the particular thinkers lived. What he gains from their speculations is the appreciation that the true nature of God is bound to be a mystery beyond the grasp of the human mind. As the sage quoted by Albo has it: "If I knew Him I would be He."¹² That there has been a considerable degree of freedom in the Jewish tradition to speculate on the mystery is comforting to the liberal supernaturalist, who is thus encouraged to engage in his own speculations. But because he believes in the God of the tradition (the speculations and the freedom to speculate are themselves part of that tradition), he will always stop short of reductionism. He will steadfastly refuse to refine God out of existence, so to speak.

There are thus three attitudes on the question of God for the modern Jew: He can be an atheist, he can be a religious naturalist, or he can be a religious supernaturalist. In other words, he can deny that God exists, he can reinterpret the idea of God in terms of the force or power that makes for righteousness, or he can believe in the personal God of the Jewish tradition. It all depends on which attitude makes the most sense of human life and is the most coherent philosophy of existence. One man's coherence is another's incoherence. Subjectivity is no doubt an element in the choice for all three philosophies. This is presumably what Kierkegaard and the other religious existentialists refer to when they speak of "the leap of faith," a rather over-worked concept in contemporary Jewish religious thought but useful in calling attention to this element of freely choosing one's philosophy. Let us examine briefly why the liberal supernaturalist prefers this attitude to the other two.

To think of God as a person is first to justify coherence itself. For if, as the atheist maintains, the universe is just there as brute fact, and if, as the religious naturalist maintains, the force that works for righteousness is similarly just there, how does one explain that feature of coherence in the universe by which science operates—indeed, by which all human reasoning operates? Taylor's famous illustration is germane in this connection.¹³ In some English railway stations near the Welsh border, small pebbles are arranged to form the words "Welcome to Wales." A skeptical passenger in the railway carriage may decide that, somehow, the pebbles just happened to have gotten there, coincidentally, to form these words by accident. What that skeptic cannot reasonably do, based on his perception, is to turn to his fellow passengers and inform them that they are entering Wales. The liberal supernaturalist would not mistake the welcome sign for an accidental formation of pebbles, but neither does he attempt to explain everything in this strange and mysterious universe, which he believes has been created by a benevolent Mind. He cannot understand why there is evil in the universe, for instance. But he can explain why humans have this constant urge to explain, the human mind exploring the workings of Infinite Mind behind the universe. In the other two hypotheses, all is random development. But randomness implies that all is fortuitous and coincidental so that ultimately there is no meaning to meaning. Unless there is a personal God, whence came personality? Unless there is Mind behind the universe, whence came human reasoning powers? Unless righteousness is written large in the universe, whence came the power that makes for righteousness—indeed, whence came the very concept of righteousness? If everything just happened to be, it would not only be religion that was wishful thinking. All thinking would be wishful.

The poet bravely and stoically declares:

It fortifies my soul to know
That though I perish truth is so.

But without belief in God in the traditional sense, what *is* this soul fortified by the truth? And where and what is that truth that those poor souls who are doomed to perish may proclaim it? Similarly, when W.B. Henley rejoices in his "unconquerable soul," he has to offer his thanks to "whatever gods may be." Ultimately, there is no escaping the "Hound of Heaven." Faith in reason is ultimately faith in God; faith in goodness is ultimately faith in God.

The Christian understanding of theism is, with few exceptions, to stress that God is personal. Indeed, in the classical Christian doctrine of the Trinity, there are three persons in the Godhead. Jews, naturally, have rejected the Christian dogma as incompatible with pure monotheism. And while the Jewish supernaturalist takes issue with the naturalistic idea because it is too impersonal, he rejects the Christian idea because it is too personal. In his polemic against Christianity, the seventeenth-century Venetian Rabbi, Leon Modena, is not convinced that the doctrine of the Trinity per se is totally incompatible with the Jewish position. He points out that the Kabbalistic doctrine of the *Sefirot*, the ten powers or potencies in the Godhead through which *En Sof* becomes manifest, resembles, to some extent, the Christian Trinity.¹⁴ (Even though the Kabbalists were devout Jews, opponents of the Kabbalah accused them of being, as they put it, "worse than the Christians" in that the Kabbalists spoke of ten, rather than three, aspects of the divine unity.)¹⁵ It is the affirmation of the three *persons* in the Trinity that has made Christianity offensive to Jews—specially the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation in which one of the three assumes human flesh. The author of an article in the journal *Judaism* a few years ago maintained that Jews have not argued against the doctrine of the Incarnation because of the impossibility of God assuming human form, but only because this did not, in fact, happen.¹⁶ Such a position is absurd. Jews have held that God, being God, cannot assume human flesh. In the Jewish doctrine, it is as impossible for God to do so as it is for Him to deny Himself or to

wish Himself out of existence. Contradiction, as Aquinas said, does not fall under the scope of divine omnipotence. The sober fact is that Jews throughout the ages have held the Christian doctrine to be idolatrous and have laid down their lives rather than embrace Christianity, although some Jewish teachers have qualified this by stating that Christianity is an idolatrous faith for "us"—that is for Jews, but not for "them"—that is, for Gentiles, who are enjoined by the Torah to reject idolatry, but who do not offend against the Noachide Laws by adopting the Christian faith.¹⁷

The Jewish supernaturalist obviously rejects agnosticism as he rejects atheism. The term agnosticism, which was coined by T.H. Huxley in the last century, was intended to convey the idea that there can be no "gnosis," no knowledge, about God.¹⁸ He was not saying, as many agnostics do nowadays, that he could not decide whether or not God exists, but rather that since the whole subject is not amenable to proof, it is *impossible* to decide one way or the other. There is thus a "hard" and a "soft" agnosticism. The "hard" agnostic holds that one can never know whether or not God exists. The "soft" agnostic cannot make up his mind on the question. The fallacy in the "soft" option is that belief in God profoundly affects a person's life, the whole quality of which is different from the life of the atheist. As Chesterton rightly said: "Show me a man's philosophy and I'll show you the man." One can adopt an agnostic attitude towards certain questions with little consequence: one can, for example, live perfectly well without ever knowing whether there are intelligent beings on other planets. But a man and a woman may agonize for a lifetime over whether they really love one another and thus never marry. And by leaving the matter in abeyance, by not deciding whether or not he believes in God, the agnostic, in fact, has decided to live without God. To remain undecided all of one's life, then, is, in effect, to decide against.

As for "hard" agnosticism, it is difficult to understand on what grounds it is affirmed that one can never know whether or

not God exists. How does the agnostic *know* that he can never know? All the pros and cons have been presented to him. Why should the human mind be incapable of deciding one way or the other on this question as it decides on other questions?

For all that, the liberal supernaturalist, while ruling out agnosticism on the basic question of God's existence, may well adopt an attitude of reverent or religious agnosticism on other questions. Because of his liberal stance, he will weigh dogma in the light of history and of reason and may come up with views that are less traditional but more coherent to him in the light of new knowledge; or he may feel that the problem is too complicated for a tidy *yes* or *no* to be given and must be left to God.

Finally, we must consider the idea of a limited personal God. Among many other thinkers, Gersonides in the Middle Ages, John Stuart Mill,¹⁹ E.S. Brightman,²⁰ and Charles Hartshorne²¹ in modern times, have presented a view of theism in which the idea of God's omnipotence is qualified. Saadiah Gaon, in his *Beliefs and Opinions*²² argued, as did Aquinas centuries later,²³ that God, who can do that which is impossible for us to do, cannot do that which is logically impossible. For instance, says Saadiah, God cannot pass the whole world through a signet ring without making either the world smaller or the ring larger. Actually, here it is not a question of whether God can or cannot do something. The statement "To pass the whole world through a ring without making the world smaller or the ring larger," is a self-contradictory and hence logically meaningless jumble of words. To pass A through B means that B is larger than A so that the statement is as logically meaningless as "to make the world smaller or the ring larger without making the world smaller or the ring larger." When one asks questions of this kind, one is really asking "Can God. . .?" without completing the sentence.

The doctrine of omnipotence, however, can be qualified in still other ways. There is the classic problem of predetermination, for example. Gersonides, bothered by the old question of how God's foreknowledge is compatible with human freedom,

holds that what God knows beforehand is all the choices open to each individual; He does not know, however, which choice the individual, in his freedom, will make.²⁴ Other thinkers similarly qualify God's omnipotence. God has all the power there is, but He is limited by what is called "The Given," that is, by things as they are. Such ideas are not a form of dualism, a belief in two gods. In dualism there are two powers, one good, the other evil, contending for supremacy; that view is certainly incompatible with Jewish monotheism. In the idea of God as personal but limited, He has no rival; there is only One God who is all powerful in some respects but lacking a degree of power in other respects because that is how things are.

Take the problem of evil, often expressed in the form: Either God can prevent evil and does not choose to do so, in which case He cannot be good. Or he wishes to prevent evil but cannot do so, in which case He cannot be omnipotent. An answer often given is that God does have the power to banish evil but does not do so because in some way evil serves the cause of good; for example, a universe in which there was no evil would be a universe in which freedom to choose the good would be impossible.²⁵ Exponents of the limited God idea, however, see no dilemma. God is good and would prevent evil if He could but He cannot. He is not, in fact, omnipotent, and evil is simply there. Of course God can and does mitigate the banefulness of evil, and He can and does urge His creatures to fight evil and be on the side of good.

Although I find this whole notion incoherent, it is possible for a supernaturalist Jew to adopt such a position without finding himself outside of Judaism. On a surface reading of the Jewish tradition, the picture which emerges is indeed one of God struggling, as it were, with that in the universe which frustrates His will. Gersonides, in his work *The Wars of the Lord* (in which he puts forward his view on God's limited foreknowledge) holds that only such a view does complete justice to the biblical record. The abstract term "omnipotence," after all, was coined by think-

ers influenced by Greek thought. Neither the term nor the idea of an *all*-powerful God is found in the Bible or in the rabbinic sources. In the Lurianic Kabbalah, the first stage in the divine creative processes is that of *tzimtzum*, the withdrawal of *En Sof* "from Himself into Himself" in order to make room, as it were, for the finite universe. Thus, in this view, the universe could only have come into existence through God's self-limitation, through His allowing finitude to encroach on His Infinity; thus, there is a doctrine of a limited God in manifestation, though not in essence, in this theology of Judaism. In an even more radical version of the Lurianic Kabbalah, *En Sof* purges Himself of the evil within Himself by His withdrawal to leave room for the universe. This version of the Kabbalah is careful to stress that the evil was only present in infinitesimal quantity, "like a grain of salt in a vast ocean."²⁶

For all the attempts of some to rename Gersonides' work "*Wars Against* the Lord" the limited God idea, unlike atheism, agnosticism, dualism, and the doctrine of the Trinity, is not necessarily incompatible with monotheism as understood by Judaism. The question is not, however, Is the idea Jewish? but rather, Is it convincing?

Isaac Husik dubbed Gersonides' idea that God does not know the contingent "a theological monstrosity."²⁷ That might be an overstatement, but every radical qualification of the idea of God's power results in severe theological difficulties, even if it is otherwise philosophically attractive. The problem with the notion of "The Given," for example, is that it is extremely difficult to entertain the notion of a God who has to work with poor material not of His own making. And what is to become of the whole idea of a purposeful God if, by definition, He can know the future only in general terms and does not know the particular choices individuals will make—choices which may very well result in the frustration of His purpose. To reply that, indeed, God depends on His creatures for the fulfillment of His purpose is to turn God into a divine experimenter and that, surely, is a

distortion of the Jewish faith, popular though the notion might be with the poetic mind. This is very different from the typically Jewish idea that God *uses* His creatures as coworkers for the realization of a purpose He knows will ultimately be realized.

A different and even more radical understanding of the personhood of God is provided in some versions of Hasidic thought, in which God is not a Being totally above His creatures but the One who embraces the All in the fullness of His Being. This notion is best called panentheism, "all is in God," though the Hasidim themselves used no such abstract term for their doctrine. In this view, from God's point of view, as it were, only God enjoys ultimate existence. It is only from the point of view of God's creatures that they and the universe they inhabit enjoy existence independently of God.²⁸ If by a "Jewish" doctrine is meant a doctrine held by Jews, then Hasidic panentheism is undoubtedly Jewish—although opponents of Hasidism like the Gaon of Vilna believed the notion to be rank heresy.²⁹ That the Vilna Gaon declared it to be heresy would not make it such for the liberal supernaturalist but here, too, there are severe difficulties, chief of which is, how can it be said that the universe and its creatures only enjoy existence from their point of view and not from God's point of view? Either they exist or do not exist.

In this lecture we have tried to consider the meaning of the doctrine of a personal God and have contrasted it with rival theological formulations. I have argued that liberal supernaturalism is both the closest in approximation to the traditional Jewish view, or, at least, to the implications of that view, and that it scores over its rivals in its coherence. The mystery remains, however, and, God being God, must remain. It was a religious man who composed the salutary doggerel:

Dear God, for as much as without Thee
We are not even able to doubt Thee.
Lord give us the grace
To convince the whole race
We know nothing whatever about Thee.

This takes us to the heart of the matter. The sophisticated theist can address God as *Thou* and can pray to Him and yet, in that very prayer, admit, as he must, that God is unknowable. But there is all the difference in the world between the ineffability of God as conceived of by the theist and the mysterious force that makes for righteousness of the religious naturalist. In the former, the true nature of God cannot be uttered or known by the human mind because God is too great to be encapsulated in human expression. In the latter, all that is affirmed is that somehow we live in the faith that the universe is so constituted that goodness will ultimately win out. No theist will seek to deny that there are difficulties in the theistic position. If he, nonetheless, opts for theism against atheism or agnosticism it is because theism, for all its difficulties, makes more sense of the universe and of human life. It is this "making sense" that is the appeal of theism. The mystery lies in the concept of the Being whom thought cannot reach; it is not a falling back on the idea of "we do not know" and leaving it at that. The whole race has to continue to live without knowing anything about God and yet countless human beings have lived and still live in the conviction that there is a *Thou* infinitely more than an *It* in charge of the universe.

While there does not seem to be any convincing midway position between theism and atheism on the theoretical level, there is, of course, an ebb and flow in the life of faith: there are times when the believer has complete conviction, other times when he is not so sure, other times again when his faith is completely shattered. But the content of belief in God does not allow for semantic confusion for the believer or the nonbeliever. All of the arguments for and against theism can be debated at length, but the discussion must not center on the meaning of the *term* God. The theist is convinced that God exists; the atheist denies it. In trying to be theist and atheist at the same time, the religious naturalist seems to be involved in semantic sleight of hand when he reduces the *term* to mean only that power that makes for

righteousness in the world. This is a very different approach from postulating two hypothetical views of the same Being as one does in considering the idea that God is omnipotent and the idea that He is limited in some respects. When the religious naturalist defends his use of the term to link his concept with Jewish tradition, this is precisely the question: Does not such a radical reinterpretation of theism sever that link entirely? It is no way to meet the real challenges to belief in modern times to say that theism is now to be understood in a different sense from that in which it has been understood throughout history. It is rather like saying that antisemitic allegations no longer have any force because the people hitherto considered to be Jews are not Jews at all. The believer in a personal God, because he is a believer, should be ready to express his doubts and speculate on the mystery. He may then emerge from the struggle with his faith fortified and enriched.