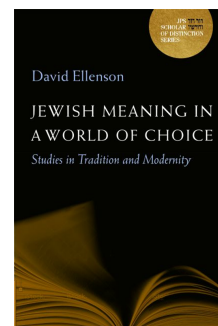
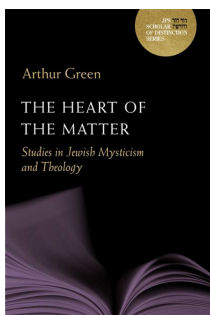


A Conversation with David Ellenson & Art Green ***JPS Scholars-of-Distinction***



Rabbis Arthur Green (left) and David Ellenson (right)
at the JPS exhibit booth, Association of Jewish Studies conference.

JPS: How does it feel to be the latest scholar in the JPS Scholar-of-Distinction series?

Ellenson: I feel a sense of overwhelming honor. Every single author in this series stands among the greatest scholars and thinkers of Judaism in the modern world. I have read all the previous volumes and have looked to each of these persons as sources for guidance and inspiration in my own work. It is unbelievable to me that I am now among them, and to know that my colleague, friend, and teacher Art Green will provide the next volume in this series makes me all the more humble and grateful for my inclusion.

Green: I am awed by the company of my great predecessors in this series. The privilege of making this particular minyan is a very great honor. I certainly hope the series will go forward and a new generation of men and women dedicated to Judaic thought and scholarship will be added to it.

JPS: What Jewish books have made the greatest impression on you over the years?

Ellenson: Of course, my readings in the classical texts of our tradition – Tanakh, Talmud, midrash, halakha, and the commentaries upon them, as well as responsa and prayerbooks – constitute the foundations of my reading life. They root me in a sense of Jewish tradition and identity, and provide me with infinite meaning and a strong sense of community. These texts allow me to participate in a conversation that spawns three thousand years and I feel privileged to add my voice to the discussions and debates, the wisdom and the knowledge contained in their pages. That said, the books and writings of Jacob Katz – *Tradition and Crisis*, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, *The Shabbos Goy*, *Jews and Freemasons in Europe*, *Out of the Ghetto* – have all had a

profound influence upon me. I love [*Judaism as a Civilization*](#) by Mordecai Kaplan and [*The Zionist Idea*](#) by my teacher Arthur Hertzberg. [*Engendering Judaism*](#) by Rachel Adler, *The Book of Blessings* by Marcia Falk, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* by Paula Hyman, and *Standing Again at Sinai* by Judith Plaskow have significantly redirected my thought and interests and have provided me with a vocabulary and framework to express my values and view the world. In recent years, *Between Jew and Arab* by David Myers and *American Post-Judaism* by Shaul Magid have been particularly provocative and stimulating. I could go on, but that is a sampling of the works from which I have learned.

Green: It is not only piety that makes me begin my response with the Torah. As one who has devoted much of his life to reading, translating, and explicating Hasidic teachings, the rhythm of following the weekly Torah portions and finding my inspiration in insights based on them is a deeply ingrained habit of minds. Of those Hasidic works, my very favorite is the *Meor Einayim* by Rabbi Nachum of Chernobyl. I am currently completing a translation of it, to appear in a new bi-lingual series from Harvard University and Tel Aviv University Press. Among more recent works, Abraham Joshua Heschel's *Torah min HaShamayim* has been tremendously formative for me. I was present in his seminar as he read the galley pages for it, and I have been teaching from it for nearly half a century. In the realm of contemporary scholarship, my friend Daniel Matt's magnificent translation and commentary to the Zohar stands out, essentially making that work accessible for the first time in any language. I fully join the Hasidic master Rabbi Pinhas of Korzec in saying that "the Zohar" – and the Hasidic teachings, I would add – "has kept me a Jew."

JPS: Can you discern a central theme or conclusion in your collected essays?

Ellenson: I do not think there is any single conclusion. However, there is surely a central theme. It is the ongoing dialectical interplay between Jewish tradition on the one hand and the cultural settings and needs of an ever-evolving larger world on the other. My work displays the manifold elements of continuity as well as change that have marked Judaism and the Jewish condition in the modern West – particularly central Europe and Germany, Israel, and North America – over the past 200 years. In so doing, I believe I have shown the capacity Judaism and Jewish leaders possess for the regeneration of Judaism and the Jewish people despite the trials of the modern era and an open world.

Green: The volume quite intentionally brings together my scholarship, including both historical and phenomenological approaches to Judaic sources, and my own theological writings. I consider these to be of a piece. That does not mean that my scholarship is subservient to my theology, nor should it be. But it does mean that I am a single person; the insights I bring to scholarly understanding of the materials proceed from the same set of life experiences on which my theology is necessarily a running commentary.

JPS: What excites you in the world of Jewish scholarship today?

Ellenson: Everything! I find it remarkable that the field of Jewish scholarship has burgeoned as much as it has over the past four decades. When I began graduate school in the 1970s Jewish scholarship was confined to a small number of outstanding universities and the number of Jewish scholars was just a fraction of what it is today. The Association for Jewish Studies can now boast over a thousand members, and the areas and depth of serious Jewish scholarship in countless fields of inquiry is staggering. If one wants to understand how it is that human beings construct meaning in their lives, the testimony of Judaism and the Jewish people, as revealed by the writings of scholars in North America, Europe, Israel, and throughout the world, must be consulted.

Green: The first word that comes to mind is "variety." I look at the program of the current Association for Jewish Studies conference and I see a range of subjects and approaches that would have shocked my own teachers, but that points to an emergence from the staid, conservative cast that once dominated this field. Judaic studies have very much entered the mainstream of Western scholarship. Yes, that does bring a certain amount of intellectual faddism, to be sure. But we need to be patient, to let "a thousand flowers bloom," and to see what trends will be seen as valued in the minds of future generations.

JPS: What's next for David Ellenson and Art Green?

Ellenson: I have received appointments as a visiting distinguished professor at both New York University and Brandeis University. I will begin at NYU this January, and next semester I will teach an undergraduate course there on "Introduction to Judaism" and a graduate seminar on "Responsa Literature in the Modern World." In September, I will begin at Brandeis. In addition, I will probably teach one course each year at HUC-JIR. It excites me to be back in the classroom, and I look forward to teaching full time. I imagine I will also continue my writing and research and hope to produce more articles and books over the years to come. I also hope to relax a bit more than I did when I had the responsibility of serving as president of HUC-JIR!

Green: After devoting much attention to theology and translation in recent decades, I am returning to the history of early Hasidism. My student Ariel Mayse and I hope to produce a volume on the role of the Miedzyrzecz school in the emergence of the movement, essentially a rewrite of early Hasidic history. Rewriting my own previous works also seems very much on the table. I am now working on an expanded version of *Radical Judaism*, to appear first in Hebrew, but then in English as well. Two other books are also awaiting expanded editions. Then there is a commentary on the prayerbook that has been on the back burner for many years. If I ever get tired of all this, writing in my hobby life also awaits me – a history of early American glass lighting. But don't hold your breath for that one.