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Preface

Looking Back

Writing a retrospective is a sobering exercise. While I by no means feel that I am at the end of my run as a scholar or thinker, I have to accept the fact that the bulk of my creative years are behind me and that my areas of interest and my approach to them are already well established and not likely to undergo significant change. The several projects, both minor and major, that I see in front of me are mostly predictable ones.

A quick look at this volume's table of contents will make it clear that I include historical and phenomenological treatments of classical Judaic subject matter (i.e., "academic" articles) together with more personal theological reflections. I do so because I consider my intellectual/spiritual project to be of a piece. To paraphrase my mentor Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav ("I *am* a 'Know what to answer the heretic'"), I *am* a bridge between Jewish scholarship and Jewish theology, between intensive study of the Jewish past and the construction of a believable Judaism for the future. A look back at my professional history will reveal the fact that I have twice left tenured positions at major universities to lead what might be considered relatively fly-by-night rabbinical schools. In a sense this move has happened three times, the first while I was still a doctoral student. In 1967, after my ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary, I returned to my undergraduate home at Brandeis University to pursue a doctorate with Professor Alexander Altmann. Proper training for a scholarly career in the study of Jewish mysticism, Altmann assured me, would involve studying medieval Latin and Arabic, learning Jewish philosophy as well as Kabbalah, and preparing a manuscript for publication, probably a text of the Zohar circle. I found these requirements both daunting and uninteresting, especially in the heady atmosphere of the late 1960s. After completing my coursework, I withdrew from graduate studies for several years, eventually returning on my own terms to write *Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav: A Critical Biography*, later published as *Tormented Master*.

In 1968 I joined with several friends to create the Havurat Shalom Community Seminary, an attempt to offer higher Jewish education in a different key. The models we had in mind for that different sort of learning were primarily the early Hasidic community (partly as idealized by Martin Buber) and the Frankfurt Lehrhaus of Franz Rosenzweig.

Those models bespoke a serious engagement with classical Jewish sources, but one focused on a devotional stance (*Torah le-shem heh* [= *ha-shem*], “learning for God’s sake,” rather than *li-shemah*, “for its own sake,” in Hasidic parlance) and a quest for personal meaning. We had an early intuitive sense of what now would be called an emerging postmodern relationship to the sources—one that understood and accepted the legitimacy and conclusions of historical scholarship but sought to go beyond it, treating the texts, both biblical and later (in my case especially the Zohar and Hasidic writings), as potential sources of wisdom and truth, even of divine presence in our midst.

In 1973 (still ABD at Brandeis) I accepted a position in the Religious Studies Department at the University of Pennsylvania. I did indeed learn something about the methodology of religious studies during those years, but I learned much more about the struggle to teach humanities in a corporate university, where the very enterprise of the humanities (and *kal va-homer* that of Religious Studies) seemed to be something of an afterthought. I was there until 1984, when I left Penn to become dean (and president, two years later) of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

Rabbinical students, I discovered there (and again today, in a different context) are wonderful to teach. They are mature, serious, devoted to learning the material, and anxious that they will never know enough. They are interested in discussing questions raised by their own struggles with faith as well as in the historical setting from which the texts emerged. My most treasured teaching experiences have all involved working with present and future rabbis.

In 1993, I was deeply honored to be offered the Philip W. Lown chair at Brandeis, formerly occupied by my own teacher, Professor Altmann. I was there until 2003, when I took a leave and then retired to the emeritus faculty in order to create the Hebrew College Rabbinical School, where I continue to serve as rector and which I see as my greatest educational achievement. My wife, Kathy, says that some men, when they reach a certain age, get a little red sports car every few years. I seem to get a little red

rabbinical school. (“Red” refers mostly to the ink color in the financial records of those institutions, rather than to the politics of their students. But then there is some of that, too.)

This alternation in career decisions coordinates fully with my literary output, and thus a recounting of it seems appropriate for introducing this volume, in which I seek to make, indeed to be, the bridge of which I have spoken. The choice to work in a seminary rather than a university context has about it both a “push” and a “pull.” I will begin with the latter, which is the reason for my decision to work at training future rabbis rather than teaching in an academic department of religion or Judaic studies, both of which I have done with some success. I find myself as committed to the Jewish future as I am to the Jewish past. Living in an era of tremendously rapid change in North American Jewish life as well as in worldwide Jewish history, it is not clear to me that our heterodox and progressive Jewish community (to which I firmly belong) will withstand the pressures of assimilation already so apparent.

As will become clear from some of the more personal essays in this volume, I became the Jew I am because I was partially raised by my mother’s parents, essentially *shtetl* Jews who had grown up in late nineteenth-century Eastern Europe. Because of various complications in my family history, these grandparents had an unusual degree of influence on me. The echoes of Yiddish speech, old-world *shul* melodies, attitudes, humor, superstitions, and kitchen aromas were all part of my childhood. When I began teaching at Penn in the mid-1970s, I realized I was teaching fourth- and fifth-generation American Jews. They were bright young people, products of suburbia and the upper middle class, totally untouched even by memories of anti-Semitism (with the exception of a small but significant sprinkling of Holocaust survivors’ children), well on their way to lucrative careers, and fully at home in this country. “Why should these people remain Jewish?” I began to ask myself. Is there anything we have to offer that is sufficiently compelling, both intellectually and spiritually, to keep them within our orb?

The conventional apologetic instinct of defending the tradition at all costs, including that of intellectual integrity, simply did not work for me. An overly strong dose of adolescent piety (stimulated by the influence of those grandparents) set me up for a crisis of faith in my college years. That experience seemed to have immunized me against both excessive devotion

to halakhic behavior and all sorts of superficial “answers” to the great spiritual challenges of life, especially in our times. I had already tried them all on for size, thank you, and had found them wanting. I came to see myself as a seeker, one comfortable with ongoing questions, challenges, and an intense but “stormy” religious life.

Among my university students, as among my own peers, I detected a small subset of such seekers—people for whom personal and spiritual quest was going to be an important theme in their lives. I sensed that these were the potential leaders of a future generation of Jewish thinkers and leaders. Most of them, however, were opting for the seemingly much more accessible spiritualities imported from the East and so much in vogue throughout the past half century. The task of articulating a Jewish faith that would speak to such people, perhaps even to broader audiences of both Jews and non-Jews, became paramount to me. I began to feel that in an age such as ours we could ill afford devoting ourselves entirely to the study and investigation of the Jewish past, filling journals with learned articles that hardly anyone would read. Unlike earlier generations of *Wissenschaft* scholars, including some of my own teachers, I no longer believed that the nobility of Jewish history, or even the profundity of classic Jewish teachings, would serve to compel Jews to carry the tradition forward. Those insights of the past would need to be recast into a language that contemporary seekers—open-minded, exposed to teachings from diverse sources, and unbounded by prior commitment to Judaism—would find worthy of further inquiry, perhaps even of devotion.

This was clearly the work of seminary, not university. I wanted to teach in an institutional setting that was openly committed to the values of Jewish creativity and Jewish survival. For me those two are the same: we will only have a chance of surviving and a reason to survive as a distinctive community if we think creatively and boldly about what our tradition has to offer and how we structure its message for new generations of Jews. I hope that the future rabbis we teach will be the bearers and creators of this renewed Jewish spiritual language. Many of those applying to rabbinical schools were in fact the Jewish seekers I was looking for, people who (like myself) were attracted to Jewish learning because in one way or another it fulfilled their souls. For many of them the rabbinic career came second, a way of justifying and continuing their own deep engagement with the Jewish sources and way of life.

In response to this need to address the contemporary seeker, I added two more parts to the course of critical/historical scholarship in the field of Jewish mysticism and Hasidism for which I had been trained. One was a commitment to translation, making texts available in English, in formats that might be attractive to readers, sometimes giving special attention to how those sources might be reread in the context of a contemporary Jewish spiritual quest. I am especially grateful to my teacher Nahum N. Glatzer for inspiring this effort. My ongoing translation project began with *Your Word Is Fire*, a little booklet of Hasidic prayer instructions (which I translated together with Barry Holtz in 1969); continued in *The Language of Truth*, my rendering of the Hasidic classic *Sefat Emet* for the contemporary reader; and finds its fullest expression in the recently published *Speaking Torah: Spiritual Teachings from around the Maggid's Table*. Currently I am engaged in a complete translation of my favorite Hasidic classic, *Me'or 'Eynayim*, by Rabbi Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl. The second addition was a series of personal theological writings, especially the trilogy *Seek My Face*, *Speak My Name* (1992), *EHYEH: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow* (2003), and *Radical Judaism* (2010). A number of shorter pieces of such personal writing are included in the present volume.

In my comments (I hope not overly unkind) about my years at Penn, I alluded to the “push” that sent me from the secular academy into seminary education. The enterprise of humanistic education, meant to enlighten and excite the mind and make the human spirit soar, is in drastic decline in the American university. Such an approach to education, involving literature, classical studies, religion, intellectual history, and the arts has come to be seen as a luxury, among the first things to be cut as we drift toward positioning the university as a glorified vocational school. To be sure, the masters of these disciplines themselves are complicit in this decline, first by having allowed the statistics-driven aspect of social science into their temple, second by an excessive bow to political correctness, and more recently by tying their writings and ultimately themselves into such knots of postmodernist jargon that few are either able to or interested in figuring out what they have to say. These successive rounds of internal weakening in the humanities have made it easy for those who never had much regard for them to drive them toward marginalization within the world of what is still called “higher education” — a phrase that did not originally mean “advanced professional training.”

I mean to suggest here that a certain sacred trust has been broken within the western educational mission. The liberal academic tradition fought a great battle against ecclesiastical domination over the course of several centuries, seeking a freedom that was certainly necessary for its own integrity. Nevertheless, a certain spirit of sacredness continued to hover over it. Education saw itself as having a *mission* of creating a more thoughtful citizenry, one respecting artistic and intellectual creativity. The “Temple of Learning” was still there to cultivate discernment and perhaps even wisdom in its students’ minds. Today no one would think of going to most American universities in search of wisdom. The thought is almost laughable.

But Jewish learning, as I understand it, is precisely about that. It is a process of inquiry and a meeting with sources, study partners, and teachers in which the human heart and its ability to embrace the mystery of the divine within the text and the learning experience is precisely “the heart of the matter.” Deep learning requires one to become open to human awareness that reaches beyond the superficial level of discourse where our daily lives are conducted. Thoughtful and open dialogue around the sources opens us up to deeper perceptions of both self and other, as well as the world around us.

Let me restate some of this in what has become my own symbolic language as a neo-Hasidic thinker. Franz Kafka’s little collection of *Parables and Paradoxes* (edited by Professor Glatzer) contains a remark to the effect that humans were expelled from the Garden of Eden not because we ate of the Tree of Knowledge but because we detached it from the Tree of Life. Unbeknown to Kafka, a Kabbalist named Rabbi Ezra of Gerona had reached the same conclusion some seven hundred years earlier, in a text only to be rediscovered and published from manuscript by Gershom Scholem several decades after Kafka’s death. For the Kabbalist, the two trees represent the essential male/female or giver/receiver duality that stands at the core of Kabbalistic symbolism; the Tree of Life is *tiferet*, the central “male” figure of God, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is *malkhut*, the receptive and liminal “female” body at the edge of the divine world that can be turned in either moral direction. Separating these two, the primal pair to be ever united in *heiros gamos*, is the root of all sin. But the Torah is known to be “A Tree of Life to those who hold fast to her (Prov. 3:18),” so the two aspects of divinity are also symbolized as written

and oral Torah, *markhut* serving as the ever-refreshing channel of interpretation through which the inscrutable written text is brought to earth. Separated from the text, she will go astray.

But surely Kafka had something else in mind, as do I. The great human fault (“original sin”) lies in the bifurcation of knowledge and life, making the quest for knowledge an independent and self-justifying end, one that can then be turned against life itself as well as toward it, both for the individual and for the world as a whole. In our era, the diversion of brilliant minds toward creating weapons of ever-greater destructive power is only the most blatant example of this detachment. It is knowledge gone astray, no longer linked to its root in life itself, no longer a blessing that enhances our shared humanity, but rather a possession that will serve to divide us, leading toward violence and strife.

All this is a long way of saying that my life has been about a quest for a way of learning that might heal this breach between life and knowledge or wisdom and learning, an approach to the Jewish sources that might paradigmatically demonstrate to moderns or postmoderns what it is to learn for the sake of inner growth, cultivating a search for truth that broadens and deepens the human spirit. Religious learning may be the last refuge of what I see as the true humanistic spirit. Of course we Jews are not entirely alone in this matter. In the classical and medieval scholastic traditions of all three western faiths, wisdom and learning were seen as only slightly different aspects of a single enterprise: one sought knowledge in order to become wise or enlightened. In the West, this remains the case perhaps only in some monastic or quasi-monastic settings: among Benedictines and perhaps a few other Catholic orders and in the Hasidic and Sufi traditions of learning. A few small “oddball” colleges continue to keep the faith as well. But the special devotion of Jews to the study of our classic sources, together with our closeness to the world of the western academy, gives us a special opportunity and obligation to make this point.

The spirit of learning that we created in the early years of Havurat Shalom has remained my inspiration over the course of a half century. The work that our little band of twenty or thirty remarkable young Jews undertook in 1968 was intended as the cutting edge of an educational revolution, one that aimed to transform Jewish life and then reach far beyond it. (You understand now that I am a person not lacking in grandiosity of vision.) I take great pride in the accomplishments of our original *haverim*, many

of which I believe are still colored by the values of those early and formative years in all of our lives. For myself, I can report some modest success in imbuing generations of both rabbinic and doctoral students with their spirit. I ask the reader of these essays to look at them with an eye open for that spirit and with an appreciation of the bridge I have sought to build between the openhearted study of the Jewish past and the articulation of a faith and spiritual path that will lead toward a creative Jewish future.

In preparing the essays for republication in this volume, I have chosen to leave them essentially in their original form. The reader should take note of the date of each article, listed in the bibliography at the end of this volume.

The text reflects my views at the time each article was written. In many cases these views have evolved since then, as may be reflected in other essays within the collection. It also means that some of the footnotes are hopelessly dated. This is particularly noticeable in the historical essays. With but a few exceptions, I have not included references to scholarly works appearing since the articles were originally published. To do so would have involved not only listing but discussion, and I felt that would require too much reshaping of the original pieces. I have made just occasional exceptions to this policy where I feared that reprinting a view I no longer hold to be true might seriously mislead the reader. I also apologize to the reader for some repetition, particularly in the theological essays. Each was originally written (or occasionally spoken) for a particular occasion or audience.

Arthur Green
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1

Introduction to *Jewish Spirituality*

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud;
have mercy on me, answer me.
In Your behalf my heart says:
“Seek My face!”
O Lord, I seek Your face.
Do not hide Your face from me;
do not thrust aside Your servant in anger;
You have ever been my help.
Do not forsake me, do not abandon me,
O God, my deliverer.

PSALM 27:8–9

Seeking the face of God, striving to live in His presence and to fashion the life of holiness appropriate to God’s presence—these have ever been the core of that religious civilization known to the world as Judaism, the collective religious expression of the people Israel. Such a statement of supreme value—aside from questions of how precisely it is to be defined and how it is achieved—could win the assent of biblical priest and prophet, of Pharisee and Essene sectarian, of Hellenistic contemplative and law-centered rabbi, of philosopher, Kabbalist, hasid, and even of moderns who seek to walk in their footsteps.

Life in the presence of God—or the cultivation of a life in the ordinary world bearing the holiness once associated with sacred space and time, with Temple and with holy days—is perhaps as close as one can come to a definition of “spirituality” that is native to the Jewish tradition and indeed faithful to its Semitic roots. Within this definition there is room for an array of varied types, each of which gives different weight to one aspect or another of the spiritual life. For some, the evocation of God’s presence includes an “ascent” to a higher realm and implies knowledge

other than that vouchsafed to most mortals. Others content themselves with “preparing the table of the Lord” or, alternatively, seek to discover “the tabernacle within the heart” and allow the *shekhinah* (Presence) to find a dwelling there. The ultimate vision may be one of a highly anthropomorphic Deity seated on His throne, an utterly abstract sense of mystical absorption within the presence, the imminent arrival of messiah, or simply that of a life lived in the fulfillment of God’s will. What all these have in common is a commitment to the life of holiness, a faith in the power of Israel’s ancient code to embody that holiness, and a knowledge that such a life fulfills God’s intent in creation and in the election, however understood, of His “kingdom of priests,” the people Israel. This consensus has lasted until modern times when we find Jews in search of the spiritual life who can no longer accept its premises as classically outlined by Judaism.

The definition of Jewish spirituality offered here has rather little to do with the term “spirituality” itself, for which there is a precise Hebrew equivalent, *ruhaniyyut*. The reader sensitive to the nuances of Hebrew speech will recognize this word as a latecomer to the ancient Hebrew tongue. It is an artifice of the medieval translators that was created first to express philosophical and scientific concepts that were Hellenic in origin. It was taken over only later by Kabbalists and pietists to describe a religious ideal that by then indeed was a thorough amalgam of the spiritual legacies of Israel and Greece. Spirituality in the western sense, inevitably opposed in some degree to “corporeality” or “worldliness” (all apologies to the contrary notwithstanding), is unknown to the religious worldview of ancient Israel; it is rather a late element, though an important one, among those factors that make up the religious legacy of medieval and later Jewry. Defining spirituality as the cultivation and appreciation of the “inward” religious life, we find both assent and demurral in the sources of Judaism. Surely the Psalmist was a master, indeed perhaps the original western master, of inwardness, and the early rabbis knew well to speak of “the service within the heart” and the values of silence and solitude. There are latter-day Hasidic treatises focused almost entirely on the cultivation of *ruhaniyyut* and *penimiyyut* (“inwardness”). At the same time, concern is aroused lest the inner be praised at the expense of the outer. The rabbi, spiritual descendant of both priest and prophet in this matter, will perforce rise to defend the externals. If inwardness implies a depre-

ciation of the outer and dismisses religious behavior (in the moral as well as the ritual realm) as *mere* ceremony or trappings, the rabbi will find this a notion hard to tolerate. Religion, as far as the rabbi is concerned, is the living word of God, ever evolving through interpretation, a word that concerns itself with proper behavior in every domain of life at least as much as it does with matters of the heart.

Aware of these reservations, and wary generally of applying to a particular tradition terms and categories that are alien to it (“mysticism” too is a category that does not exist within classical Jewish sources), we nevertheless permit ourselves to speak of Jewish spirituality, defining it as we have: Israel’s striving for life in the presence of God. This should allow talmudist, halakhist, and commentator to take their deserved place within the collective “spiritual” enterprise alongside the more obvious prophet, philosopher, and mystic.

This view is also meant to dispel the ancient and widely held notion that there are in fact two Judaisms, one of the flesh or the law and the other of the spirit, or one of the mind and the other of the heart. This idea has a surprisingly long history and has been held by Christian detractors of Judaism who reflect the biases of the New Testament, but also by many Jews themselves. The Kabbalists supported a version of this idea, claiming that their teaching was the “soul” of Judaism and that without it rabbinic practice was but a lifeless body. Students of Judaism in the early twentieth century, themselves rebels against the stultifying world of the Eastern European *shtetl* (“small town”), also put forth a version of this idea (one thinks here of Buber, Berdyczewski, and Horodezky), by which they hoped to save and renew the heart of Judaism while casting off its outer shackles. From the historian’s point of view, there is no single secret doctrine that serves to quicken Judaism, to save it from becoming a life-threatening morass of detail. Jews throughout the ages, including the early rabbis themselves, have struggled with this issue of providing meaning and spiritual content to the tradition. Some have done so in highly systematic fashion, creating such grand edifices as Jewish Aristotelianism and classical Kabbalah. Others, including the Hasidic preacher, have chosen to do so in a more spontaneous and sporadic manner. The very notion of a divine or primordial Torah, a thought that has accompanied rabbinic Judaism since its earliest days, seems, as Gershom Scholem has pointed out, to call forth a sense that there is some deeper esoteric meaning to the text at hand, some secret that

is more than any ordinary human reading of Torah can provide. All of the systems of meaning that have emerged within the classical Jewish context have made use of this idea and have found within it the theological license for that exegetical creativity which is in fact the tradition's very lifeblood. "Turn it over, turn it over, for all is in it" has allowed sages and seekers of the most varied sorts to see their own thought, influenced as it may be by spiritual currents far from those of ancient Israel, as the true meaning of their own religious legacy. There are not *two* Torahs, a revealed and a hidden, but rather both *one* and *many*—as many as the ongoing creativity of the Jewish people can provide.

A history of Judaism from the viewpoint of the phenomenology of religion has yet to be written. The ways in which classic patterns of myth, symbol, and archetype survive the great transformations wrought by biblical religion and reappear, *mutatis mutandis*, in rabbinic and later Judaism are yet to be fully traced. The unique element of diaspora, spreading the Jews throughout the Western world at an early and crucial stage in their religion's development, also needs here to be taken into account. The traditions that grew out of that monotheistic and iconoclastic revolution in ancient Canaan, overlaid with memories of the Babylonian exile and its Persian aftermath as well as with evidence of the early contacts of Israel with Greece and Rome, were carried throughout the known world by bands of faithful wanderers. Yet who would dare say that Judaism, even of the most pious and traditionalist sort, remained unaffected by the cultural patterns of those in whose midst particular groups of Jews happened to settle? It is not at all clear that a Jew in Spain in the twelfth century and one in Poland or Bohemia some five hundred years later, even if performing the very same ritual actions, were in fact "doing the same thing." Distinctive religious subcultures emerged within the history of Jewry. Even in latter-day terms, if one thinks of Lithuania, Italy, and Yemen, highly diverse images of Judaism come to mind. These, it should be added, were not simply mirror images of the respective non-Jewish cultures amid which they were created: Jewish communities themselves, separated by distances of both time and space, created cultural and religious life patterns that differed greatly both from one another and from those of the host cultures in whose shadow they flourished.

Nor were differences in religious types attributable only to variations in historical or geographical circumstance. The same Amsterdam of the

seventeenth century was home to rationalists and messianic Kabbalists, both of them probably nurtured by the same combination of Marrano past and expanding future. Warsaw at the turn of the twentieth century housed Hasidim of various stripes alongside socialists, Zionists, Yiddishists, and Hebraists in every imaginable combination—all of them products of, some of them rebels against, the same cultural milieu. Any account of the spiritual life of Jewry undoubtedly is in need of the word “varieties” somewhere in its title. Indeed it may be that a major lesson the Jewish experience has to offer the historian of religion is just that: even within this “smallest of all the nations” there lie a vast array of different religious types, spiritual activities, and attempts at self-understanding. No single characterization or typology of “Jewish spirituality” could possibly comprehend them all. How much more true must this be for religious empires far more vast than the relatively circumscribed realm of Jewry!

What then is it that coinhabitants of this religious and cultural phenomenon known as Judaism have in common? First, it must be said that they all are Jews, and this is no mere tautology. Judaism is the religious path of a distinct national group, one that has defined itself in ethnic as well as religious terms throughout the ages. The shared legacy of national symbols, including language, land (held dear, as history has shown, despite long absence), and common history, including but not limited to a history of persecution, is quite inseparable from Jewish religious identity. Yet the historian of religion must probe further, asking what it is within this legacy of the past that makes for the vital and ongoing thread of Judaism as a religious enterprise. In this search, one is first tempted to go the route of essentialism: somewhere at the core there must be an essence of Judaism that all its many bearers hold in common. This was, in fact, the path taken by most presentations of Judaism for the western reader, including both attempts at “objective” religious history and works of advocacy by Jewish theologians, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Of course this essence was usually articulated in theological terms—and then often in terms not unsurprisingly accommodating either to the writer’s particular religious stance within the Jewish community or to the properly liberal and western values that an author might have thought his readers would find most comfortable. Thus ethical monotheism, the struggle against idolatry, and a vague commitment to “the rule of law”—though not to particular laws—were emphasized by liberal Jewish writers, whereas

halakhah in its specific sense, but also expanded to “the halakhic mind,” was brought to the fore by traditionalists.

Aside from the obviously self-serving quality of some of these presentations (and our selection from them admittedly borders on caricature), the attempts at arriving at such an essence have been largely discredited in Jewish scholarly circles because of recent developments in historical research. Essentialism always wound up positing a “mainstream” in the history of Jewry; those who diverged from whatever the particular set of norms was said to be were then characterized as minor groups of dissenters, who cut themselves off from the ongoing stream of Jewish history. But the work of mid-twentieth-century Jewish scholarship has almost entirely discredited the notion of *any* theological mainstream. Erwin R. Goodenough, researching the archaeological remains of Jewry throughout the eastern Mediterranean world, gave the lie to the widely held view that a rabbinic mainstream, puritanical, iconoclastic, and uncompromisingly anti-syncretistic, dominated Palestinian and Babylonian Jewry in the first centuries of the common era. Harry A. Wolfson has shown how thoroughly Jewish philosophers from Philo to Spinoza were part and parcel of the Western philosophical tradition, at times having more intellectually in common with their Christian and Muslim counterparts than they did with Jews who stood outside philosophy. Above all, Gershom Scholem and his studies of medieval Jewish mysticism and seventeenth-century Sabbatian messianism have had a revolutionary impact on the field of Jewish studies as a whole. Scholem has forced us to realize that notions of mainstream were posited largely out of ignorance and were sustained by the selective suppression of evidence. This process reflects the cultural biases to which historians, perhaps only slightly less than theologians, were themselves subject.

The elusive quality of any essentials that might still be said to underlie, even in an unspoken way, most or all Jewish theologies is heightened by the nonfundamentalist relationship that traditional Jewry has always had with its sacred scripture. Although the veracity and theoretical authority of the Bible were taken for granted from the Hellenistic era down to modern times, unanimity about the meaning of any but the blandest biblical phrases was utterly lacking. There is no postbiblical Jewish theology in any age that could claim to base itself on a *peshat*, that is, an obvious and straightforward reading of the biblical text. The contest between interpret-

ers is not about which have scripture on their side, but rather about which display the greater ingenuity in marshaling scriptural support for their views. When in medieval times certain dogmatic formulations achieved a status that was nearly canonical (belief in divine omnipotence, or in creation *ex nihilo*), Kabbalists and others played freely with these, reinterpreting their meaning to suit their own ideas.

What then, if not theological essentials, will serve as the binding substance for the variety of Jewish spiritual expressions? It seems safe to begin with the text itself. All Judaisms since approximately the second century CE have had in common a defined body of sacred scripture, the Hebrew bible. Though exegetical license has indeed reigned free, it is not fair to assume that the text has made no claims on those who are faithful to it. These claims, the ones least bendable by interpretation, exist first in the realm of religious deed and second in that of religious language, imagery, and style.

The relative unanimity of premodern Jews in matters of religious action, codified as *halakhah* or the “path,” is well known. The commandments of the Torah as defined and elaborated by the early rabbis were accepted as binding by all Jews except the Karaite minority, at least from the early Middle Ages down to the seventeenth century. There were, to be sure, ongoing debates concerning both details of the law and the seemingly large matter of what exactly it was that constituted the 613 commandments of the Torah itself. But these were dwarfed by the overwhelming unanimity in most matters of praxis, including both those matters “between man and God” and those “between man and man,” or the ritual-devotional and the moral-ethical spheres. It is worthy of note that neither premodern Hebrew nor Yiddish has a term that may be properly used to translate “orthodox”; *shomer mizwot* (“observer of the commandments”) or, in the more casual Yiddish vernacular, *shoimer shabes* (“Sabbath keeper”) is as close as one could come. It was this unanimity of life pattern that allowed for Moses Mendelsohn’s claim in the eighteenth century that Judaism was in fact a matter of “revealed legislation.” This, of course, allowed for the wide berth of intellectual freedom that he as an enlightener sought. This view of Judaism, though thoroughly discredited by the nineteenth-century “essentialists,” was based in the reality of long experience with one aspect of the tradition, the relative unanimity of deed and form.

Deeds, of course, are an aspect of symbolic speech, especially so when they take the regularized and repeated form of ritual. Alongside this type

of speech-act, then, contemporary scholarship suggests that Judaism (like any religious tradition) has a unique pattern of verbal tropes and rubrics that constitute a unifying style of expression, one that transcends even great chasms in theological meaning. Any theology of Judaism, for example, must claim to believe in one God; monotheism is embodied in the essential trope of *shema' yisrael* (“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” [Deut. 6:4, recited in the daily liturgy]). A theology that denies the truth of the *shema'* or openly proclaims belief in a multiplicity of heavenly powers can hardly claim a place within Judaism. But the range of meaning given to the *shema'* remains quite open; the One may be a unity of ten powers, as for the Kabbalistic, or the *shema'* may attest to the absolute oneness of God and world, as for the *HaBaD Hasid*. The fact that both of these views stand in utter contradiction to the theology of Hebrew scripture constitutes no real problem in the history of Judaism, but stands rather as a monument to the exegetical success and freedom of these latter-day thinkers.

Another such basic trope is the belief in Torah as revealed at Mount Sinai. Again, a Judaism without some sort of Sinaitic revelation is inconceivable, but the range of beliefs about exactly what was given at Sinai, or what it means to speak of revelation, or the degrees of difference between inspiration and revelation, is tremendous, even before one takes into account the great variety of modern Jewish positions on this matter. Realistically speaking, the traditional claim that “whoever says ‘This verse’ or ‘This word’ is not from heaven is one who ‘despises the word of the Lord’” (Num. 15:31) comes down to mean that those who can find no place for *some* concept of *Torah mi-Sinai* have rejected an essential rubric of Jewish discourse and thus have placed themselves outside the theological consensus of Israel.

Do we then propose naught but a new essentialism, one of tropes and rubrics rather than of dogmas and ideas? It should not be difficult to compile a list of essential religious vocabulary of which the would-be Jewish theologian could make rather free use. Of course (Heaven be praised! we should perhaps add), the matter is not so simple. Having used rather obvious and easily labeled examples, we speak of a literary and theological *style*, one carried in part by the mention of certain key terms but hardly reducible to them. The ways in which these terms are used, the frequency with which they appear, how they are juxtaposed with one another, and a whole host of other more or less intangible elements collectively constitute the

religious language of Judaism. The well-trained eye of a text scholar or ear of a native speaker learns to detect unusual patterns, changes in meaning, and shifts of emphasis even in the seemingly most standard bit of rabbinic discourse. Especially interesting here are two late genres of premodern Jewish theological literature. Scholem's studies of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century documents in which Sabbatian heresy was masked behind the language of traditional piety are instructive in illuminating the outermost limits of Jewish religious language and the ways in which even an exaggeratedly pietistic Jewish style can be distorted to produce radically new meanings. Similarly, the literature of Hasidism, though hardly heretical in the same way, offers the careful reader a chance to explore the traditional language and style of Judaism pushed to the extreme, as the masters used it to legitimize the particular religious values for which they stood.

The Judaism that all held in common was, we are claiming, a shared religious *language*, rooted in a body of sacred Scripture and anchored to daily life by a prescribed pattern of deeds. Like any language in currency over a wide geographical area and through the course of many centuries, it evolved, changed, grew, and developed its own varied "dialects." A multiplicity of religious types found within it sufficient breadth and depth to express their differences of vision and understanding; even those labeled "sinners" or "heretics" in times of controversy continued to make use, often the most creative use, of this religious language. Only in modern times has the language itself suffered a serious challenge, as the weakening of its own faith-claims has combined with the tremendous assimilatory pressures on Jewry to diminish greatly the hold it has maintained over the Jewish people. But the challenge to tradition, the various attempts to buttress it, and the large and highly variegated movements of modern or postmodern Jews seeking to return to its fold are themselves all a part of the ongoing history of Jewish spirituality.