My Jewish spiritual life has been enriched by Mary Oliver’s poems for a decade. Many colleagues have used her work in sermons, services, and teaching. And yet, Mary Oliver is not Jewish and there are even several Christian references in her work. This essay will show the ways in which I consider her work so valuable to us as Jews.

Oliver is a poet, not a theologian, which means that she is not going to give us a consistent and organized understanding of God and God’s relationship to us. Theology tends toward abstraction and generalities subject to rational analysis while poetry attempts to convey the experience itself. As a poet, Mary Oliver expresses the many facets of her experience with God’s world and with God: it is that which resonates with so many of us. In her poems, we will see different and even conflicting experiences of God’s presence in the world. Oliver’s poems touch our experience more than our thought. To use Buber’s categories, she is trying to express her I-Thou relationship to the world, rather than her I-It relationship; and, in the process, she comes to awareness of the eternal Thou. Put another way, her work is so valuable because whereas theology is a left-brain activity, she taps into the world of the right-brain, which is where we experience the Divine. And for her, that experience is varied and even contradictory as it is with many of us. This is no small matter, because it opens us to another, very different approach to experiencing God’s presence.

Awe and Wonder

Most of her poems deal with the natural world, the main themes being awe, wonder, and thankfulness. This, for many, is the gateway to a relationship with God. Heschel says, “Awe precedes faith; it is at
the root of faith . . . It is ‘the beginning and gateway of faith.’” ³ More recently, Arthur Green says, “Our task as religious persons is not to offer counter scientific explanations for the origin of life. Our task is to notice, to pay attention to, the incredible wonder of it all, and to find God in that moment of paying attention.”⁴ A walk in the woods or on the beach, an examination of a blade of grass, a tree, a squirrel is an opportunity for us to feel awe and from there, to sense God’s presence. Mary Oliver’s poems draw our attention to this process again and again; they remind us to pay attention, close attention, to be open to wonder and to be thankful. She tells us, “To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.”⁵ And she informs us that

Every day I walk out into the world
to be dazzled, then to be reflective.⁶

She invites us to do the same. Of course there are many things that keep us from wonder—our busyness, our lists of things to do, our ambition:

I have dreamed
of accomplishment.
I have fed

ambition.
I have traded
nights of sleep

for a length of work . . .⁷

She then recovers and says,

Lo, and I have discovered
how soft bloom

turns to green fruit
which turns to sweet fruit.⁸

Mary Oliver reminds us how important wonder is:

And what would we be, beyond the yardstick,
beyond supper and dollars,
if we were not filled with such wondering?⁹
More directly, Thomas W. Mann says, “Oliver links spirituality, attention and attitude” and quotes her: “‘Now I think there is only one subject worth my attention and that is the recognition of the spiritual side of the world and, within this recognition, the condition of my own spiritual state...What I mean by spirituality is not theology but attitude.’”

Oliver is prepared to put all the grand and unanswerable questions aside to pay attention to the ordinary plants around us:

Oh, my dear heart,
my own dear heart,
full of hesitations,
questions, choice of directions,

look at the world.
Behold the morning glory,
the meanest flower, the ragweed, the thistle.
Look at the grass.

Moreover, she is even suspicious of the grand questions:

Summer begins again.
How many
do I still have? Not a worthy question,

I imagine.
Hope is one thing,
gratitude another
and sufficient

unto itself... I don’t have the answers
and anyway I have become suspicious
of such questions,
and as for hope,
that tender advisement,
even that

I’m going to leave behind.
I’m just going to put on my jacket, my boots,
I’m just going to go out...

Since we are distracted not only by our busyness but also by the grand and unanswerable questions, she reminds us where we
would best focus our attention. We may, for example, become so preoccupied with the problem of evil that we are distracted from what would be a more appropriate focus: a deep appreciation of the wonder of God’s world. In the same vein she says,

Let me keep my distance, always, from those who think they have the answers.

Let me keep company always with those who say “Look!” and laugh in astonishment, and bow their heads.\(^\text{13}\)

This is at the heart of her work and one of the reasons her poems are so loved. They help to put us into a relationship with the world in such a way that we are more open to God’s presence.

**Awareness of God**

Mary Oliver goes beyond paying attention. She moves from awe and appreciation to an awareness of God. Sometimes she is oblique:

Meanwhile, once in a while, I have chanced, among the quick things, upon the immutable. What more could one ask?\(^\text{14}\)

I take “immutable” to refer to God. She is more specific when she says,

There are things you can’t reach. But you can reach out to them, and all day long. . . . Like goldfinches, little dolls of gold flitting around the corner of the sky

of God, the blue air.\(^\text{15}\)

In other places she speaks as if she were a pantheist. She speaks to unnamed people when she says,

. . . I see you in all your seasons . . . talking about God as if he were an idea instead of the grass, instead of the stars, the rabbit caught . . .\(^\text{16}\)
In an early work she warns that God doesn’t answer: “Whoever He is, count on it: He won’t answer.” Then she speaks of how God doesn’t protect the hunted. She describes a shark having been caught and hoisted up:

And Him, somewhere, ponderously lifting another world, setting it free to spin, if it can, in a darkness you can’t imagine.

This is noteworthy in that Oliver sees the violence of the owl or fox hunting for food as simply a natural part of the way things are. There, she sounds like a deist. Yet, she also addresses God:

Lord, my body is not yet a temple, but only one of your fair fields. An empty field that nobody wants, at least not yet.

. . . Lord, consider me, and my earnest work...

In one of my favorite poems she not only has a “conversation” with God but also presents us with our life’s work:

I am a woman sixty years old and of no special courage. Everyday—a little conversation with God, or his envoy the tall pine, or the grass-swimming cricket.

. . . Everyday—I have work to do . . . I am a woman sixty years old, and glory is my work.

There are two striking aspects to these lines. First, she does talk to God but sees the pine, etc., as God’s envoy, as God’s representative. She sees the trees and the creatures of the world as God’s creations through which we can approach God. Second, she speaks of the purpose of her life: glory; namely, to appreciate the glory of God’s world and in drawing attention to it, draw attention to its Creator.

To put her prayer into perspective, we can compare and contrast it with the teaching of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav: “Know that when a man prays in a field, the strength of all the grasses comes into his prayer and gives him strength.” Oliver sees the trees as God’s envoy while for R. Nachman, in this teaching, we address God while the trees add power to our prayer.
She relates a powerful experience in which she is walking on the beach. Seeing a seal pup alone on the sand, she goes close to it and lies down with her back to it. Soon the seal pup rolls over and she feels the length of its body next to hers. She writes,

... and maybe
our breathing together was some kind of heavenly conversation
in God’s delicate and magnifying language, the one
we don’t dare speak out loud,
not yet.\textsuperscript{22}

This is the ineffable sense of God’s presence, an awareness of God beyond language. This is the I-Thou relationship I mentioned earlier, the relationship in which the eternal Thou is present. In the epigraph to \textit{Why I Wake Early} she quotes George Herbert, the seventeenth century poet and Anglican priest: “Lord! Who hath praise enough?” which is the underlying theme of her work.\textsuperscript{23}

Her musings about God quickly turn specific:

On a summer morning,
I sat down
on a hillside
to think about God—

a worthy pastime.

But, she immediately moves away from thinking about God in the abstract to paying attention to God’s world:

Near me, I saw
a single cricket;
it was moving the grains of the hillside

this way and that way.\textsuperscript{24}

In a clear expression of God as Creator, she says,

He gave the fish
her coat of foil,
and her soft eggs . . .
He made the circles
of the days and the seasons
to close tightly,  
and forever—

then open again.\textsuperscript{25}

Oliver sums up her entire effort in a short essay: “The physical- 
cality of the religious poets should not be taken idly. He or she, 
who loves God, will look most deeply into His works . . . The pear 
orchard is not only profit, but a paradise of light . . . Have you no-
ticed?”\textsuperscript{26} She goes further in “Musical Notation: 2.” Listen to what 
she says:

Everything is His.  
The door, the door jamb.  
The wood stacked near the door.  
The leaves blown upon the path  
that leads to the door.  
. . . I look around.  
I fill my arms with the firewood.  
I turn and enter His house, and close His door.\textsuperscript{27}

It is abundantly evident that not only does Oliver have a sense of 
awe and wonder about the world, but that she has a deep sense of 
God’s presence in the world. It is this that makes her poems reso-
nate so deeply. And her various expressions of God’s presence are 
expressions of our varied experiences of God’s presence too.

\textbf{Prayer}

Mary Oliver not only encourages our sense of wonder and writes 
of her sense of God’s presence, she also prays. She encourages our 
simplicity and spontaneity in prayer:

\begin{quote}  
I know a lot of fancy words.  
I tear them from my heart and my tongue.  
Then I pray.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

She continues this theme in her poem “Praying”:

\begin{quote}  
It doesn’t have to be  
the blue iris, it could be  
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
\end{quote}
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don’t try
to make them elaborate, this isn’t
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.29

Notice that she begins by urging us to pay attention and then af-
fter we manage to say a few simple words we can enter a sense of
thankfulness and then silence. Surely at least some of us have had
the experience where some small thing moves us to a spontaneous
prayer in which we attempt to express our awe and thankfulness
but we end in silence because the words are not adequate. Besides,
we need the silence to listen for “another voice . . .”

Oliver relates another very powerful experience when she tells
how she went out before dawn and sat quietly under a tree. Two
beautiful does, which she likens to “beautiful women,” came
so close to her that she could see their “thick lashes.” Then they
“went off together through the trees.” She reflects on this sublime
experience:

. . . I was alone,

I was thinking:
so this is how you swim inward,
so this is how you flow outward,
so this is how you pray.30

Here, praying isn’t a matter of words, but of the heart, of the inner
life, of appreciation and love of the world, about the privilege of
being alive, about the privilege of being a witness, God’s witness.

As much as this seems to speak of spontaneous prayer, she also
understands that regularity in practice and ritual are essential. In
the essay “Habits, Differences, and the Light That Abides” she
speaks of how important are the regular habits of our religious
practice:

Men and women of faith who pray—that is, who come to a cer-
tain assigned place, at definite times . . . The habit has become
their life . . . The hours are appointed and named: they are the Lord’s. Life’s fretfulness is transcended . . . Divine attentiveness cannot be kept casually, or visited only in season, like Venice or Switzerland. Or, perhaps it can, but then how attentive is it? And if you have no ceremony, no habits, which may be opulent or may be simple but are exact and rigorous and familiar, how can you reach toward the actuality of faith, or even a moral life, except vaguely? The patterns of our lives reveal us. Our habits measure us.31

She also understands that to care for God’s creatures is a way of speaking to God, a form of prayer:

Dear Lord, I have swept and I have washed but still nothing is as shining as it should be for you. Under the sink, for example, is an uproar of mice—it is the season of their many children. What shall I do?

She provides other examples of animals needing shelter: squirrels, a raccoon, a fox, a sea-goose. Then,

. . . when I speak to the fox, the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-goose, know that really I am speaking to you whenever I say, as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, come in.32

Still, she struggles as so many of us do:

Lord God, mercy is in your hands, pour me a little. And tenderness too. My need is great . . . I run away over the green fields wanting your voice, your tenderness . . . When I first found you I was filled with light, now the darkness grows and it is filled with crooked things, bitter and weak, each one bearing my name.33

Do not many of us, too, struggle with God’s seeming absence? Whereas the Psalms such as 145 praise God in generalities, Oliver, in her poem “On Thy Wondrous Works I Will Meditate,” where she references Psalm 145, offers very specific images. It is
a celebration of the world and, mostly indirectly, of the Creator. Oliver says,

So it is not hard to understand
where God’s body is, it is
everywhere and everything; shore and the vast
fields of water, the accidental and the intended
over here, over there. And I bow down
participate and attentive

it is so dense and apparent.34

Some may be uncomfortable with her reference to “God’s body,” as an apparent Christian reference, although most Christians would not use it the way she does.35 Nevertheless, the monists among us would take it as an engaging metaphor for the Unity of All. Arthur Green speaks of “the One garbing itself in the multicolored garment of diversity and multiplicity.”36 Elsewhere he says, “There is no ultimate duality here, no ‘God and the world, and self,’ only one Being and its many faces.”37

In the same poem she offers a heartfelt prayer reminiscent of the final verse of Psalm 145: “My mouth shall utter the praise of the Lord,/and all creatures shall bless His holy name forever and ever.” Oliver writes,

Every morning I want to kneel down on the golden
cloth of the sand and say
some kind of musical thanks for
the world that is happening again—another day—
from the shawl of wind coming out of the
west to the firm green

flesh of the melon lately sliced open and
eaten, its chill and ample body
flavored with mercy. I want
to be worthy of—what? Glory? Yes, unimaginable glory.
Lord of melons, of mercy, though I am
not ready, nor worthy, I am climbing toward you.38

This is the process for so many of us who give thanks but also feel that we are always “climbing toward” God.
Environment

Given Oliver’s attitude toward nature, it is not surprising that she would be concerned about our environment. In a sense all her poems speak to this issue, but she does have a few that are more direct and to the point. In a two-line poem she titles “Watching a Documentary about Polar Bears Trying to Survive on the Melting Ice Floes,” she says,

That God had a plan, I do not doubt.  
But what if His plan was, that we would do better?39

Here, she sees that environmental degradation caused by people is really an offense against God. And a year later she asks a pointed rhetorical question:

What is the vitality and necessity  
of clean water?  
Ask the man who is ill, who is lifting  
his lips to the cup.

Ask the forest.40

Oliver is also sensitive to the great gaps in wealth between rich and poor. On a visit to Mexico she notices how

The tops of the northbound trains are dangerous.  
Still they are heaped with hopefuls.

She is disturbed that people should be so desperate and comments,

Meanwhile, let me change my own life  
into something better.

She tells us that she greets the children

... as I pass  
with my passport, and money, in my pocket.41

Death

Another prominent theme is the many aspects of death and our effort to reach out for immortality. She is troubled—are we
all—about death in the world. Oh, we know all the answers, but in our hearts . . . well, that is another matter. Don’t we often think that death is for someone else, not us?

In a number of passages she ties death to God. In an essay she includes a prose-poem:

What can we do about God, who makes and then breaks every god-forsaken, beautiful day?

What can we do about all those graves in the woods, in old pastures in small towns in the bellies of cities?

God’s heavy footsteps through the bracken through the bog through the dark wood his breath like a swollen river

his switch, lopping the flowers, forgive me, Lord, how I still, sometimes, crave understanding.42

She clearly expresses the connection between God and death:

I don’t know what God is.
I don’t know what death is.

But I believe they have between them some fervent and necessary arrangement.43

More specifically, when she sees a duck with her ducklings being eyed by a ravenous turtle and is afraid for them:

It is hard sometimes, oh Lord, to be faithful . . .
I know you know everything—
I rely on this.
Still, there are so many small bodies in the world, for which I am afraid.44

“Faithful,” not in the sense of belief, but rather in the sense of trying to attune herself to God even in the face of unsettling realities. Sometimes she speaks in pantheistic terms:
If God exists he isn’t just butter and good luck—
he isn’t just the summer day the red rose,

he’s the snake he’s the mouse,
he’s the hole in the ground,

for which thoroughness, if anything, I would adore him,
if I could adore him.

Adore him.45

She hints that death is not the end. In “Heron Rises from the Dark, Summer Pond,” she says,

. . . and I think
    how unlikely it is

that death is a hole in the ground.46

She goes further in “I Looked Up,” where she writes,

What misery to be afraid of death.
What wretchedness, to believe only what can be proven.47

She puts herself in God’s hands:

    Maker of All Things,
    including appetite,
    including stealth,
    including the fear that makes
    all of us, sometime or other,
    flee for the sake
    of our small and precious lives,
    let me abide in your shadow—
    let me hold on
    to the edge of your robe
    as you determine
    what you must let be lost
    and what will be saved.48

And yet she understands that life and death go together; how, so to speak, they are different sides of the same coin; and further, there is something after death. The question is “what?”
One view is expressed in “Poem: By the Wild-Haired Corn,” where she reminds us that death is a kind of transformation,

... I remember how everything will be everything else, by and by.49

And in “What the Body Says,”

... a little while and then this body will be stone; then it will be water; then it will be air.50

Any walk in the woods will demonstrate that simple reality. The tall trees with their leaves in summer tower above a forest floor covered with leaves, fallen trees, and branches in various states of decay. They give life and home to a multitude of creatures, large and small, and make the forest above it possible, as the forest above makes the teeming life on the floor below it possible. One cannot exist without the other: they are intimately connected in one circle of life. And quite specifically,

... As for death, I can’t wait to be a hummingbird, can you?51

Is she referring to transmigration of souls or the simple transformation of one kind of being into the stuff of another? She goes further hinting that something of the soul survives. In “What the Body Says,” she writes,

I was born here, and I belong here, and I will never leave. . . .

... until I am safely and entirely something else. . . .

I wonder about the mystery that is surely up there in starry space and how some part of me will go there at last.
It would seem that while the body may morph into something else at death, she also says that “some part of me” (the soul?) goes “up there” (a metaphor for being with God?).\textsuperscript{52} Oliver, who is no stranger to death, gives us another reference to an afterlife. After her beloved partner of many years, Molly Malone Cook, to whom she dedicated most of her books, died, Oliver wrote,

\begin{verbatim}
I have lost you and
    others have possibly lost a
beloved one,
    and wonder, where are they now?

The trees, anyway, are
    miraculous, full of
angels (ideas); even
    empty they are a
good place to look, to put
    the heart at rest—all those
leaves breathing the air, so
peaceful and diligent, and certainly
    ready to be
the resting place of
    strange, winged creatures
that we, in this world, have loved.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{verbatim}

Here she imagines that our loved ones and perhaps we, too, will become celestial beings after death; but does she mean this literally? And, if so, what would it mean to become an “idea”? Or is this simply the play of her imagination—remember she is a poet and not a theologian.

**Implications**

The implications of Oliver’s work are far-reaching. First, it enriches our own spiritual lives. Second, it is a valuable resource to be used in sermons, teaching, and liturgy in our communities. Third, it teaches us the importance of silence, of \textit{hitbod\’dut}, of contemplation, of being by and with ourselves, and of paying attention. And fourth, it challenges us to ask ourselves if we are providing the opportunities within our worship for this kind of experience. Is there time enough in our worship for real silence without distracting background music? Have we taught our communities to appreciate this
aspect of inner Jewish spirituality? Are we providing the opportunities within our total communal program for this kind of experience? In short, I believe that many of our people are searching for not just a communal experience and not just an ethnic experience and not just a Jewish experience, but they hunger for a spiritual experience within the Jewish community—a genuinely Jewish spiritual experience. Mary Oliver’s work points us in that direction.

Mary Oliver, may she live long, has offered us a precious gift of a lifetime of poems in over twenty books, in which she has given voice to some of our own, barely articulated yearnings, as well as shown us new things we never noticed before.

Notes


2. This does not mean that Oliver is the only poet whose work is valuable in engendering Jewish spirituality, but she is the one who has had the most influence on me and whose work is generally quite accessible.


8. Ibid., 20.


12. Ibid., 73–74.
13. Mary Oliver, “Mysteries, Yes,” in ibid., 62
18. Ibid., 70.
21. Sefer Likutei Moharan II:11. My thanks to Rabbi Jonathan Slater for bringing this passage to my attention and for his suggestion that this teaching is probably the origin of the famous prayer attributed to R. Nachman: “Master of the universe,/grant us the ability to be alone:/may it be our custom to go outdoors each day/among the trees and grass,/among all growing things,/and there may we be alone,/and enter into prayer.” For a brief discussion of R. Nachman’s thinking see, Jay Michaelson, Everything is God (Boston: Trumpter, 2009), 72–73.
23. Oliver, epigraph to Why I Wake Early, unnumbered page.
27. Oliver, “Musical Notation: 2,” in ibid., 38
37. Ibid., 18.
BOOK REVIEWS

46. Oliver, “Heron Rises from the Dark, Summer Pond,” in What Do We Know, 27.
47. Oliver, “I Looked Up,” in Owls and Other Fantasies, 59.

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A Review Symposium

Laurence L. Edwards, Book Review Editor

Reviewing

Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology
by Michael Fishbane

In Franz Rosenzweig’s address “Upon the Opening of the Jüdisches Lehrhaus,” there is a phrase that I have come to regard as a key to modern (and postmodern) Jewish thought. He speaks to “all of us to whom Judaism, to whom being a Jew, has again become the pivot of our lives.”1 With this phrase Rosenzweig turns from the classical obligation to “know how to answer an apikoros” and turns instead to the effort to articulate a Judaism that has somehow become meaningful once again to those who have been alienated,
distant, who perhaps “do not even know how to ask” the question of what it is to be a Jew.

Michael Fishbane, in this work of theology, swims in the Buber-Rosenzweig stream of modern Jewish thought. If it is an attempt to convince those who are skeptical, it is that only indirectly. But for those of us to whom Judaism “has again become the pivot,” Fishbane offers a stunning description of why and how Judaism continues to speak to us. Careful attention to Fishbane’s closely attuned reading of the texts and textures (to paraphrase slightly the title of his very first book) of Jewish thought will be richly rewarded.

Fishbane’s contributions to biblical studies and to the history of Jewish interpretation are legion, a body of work both original and wide-ranging, and always composed with masterful elegance of style. He takes language with utmost seriousness, reflected in his elevated vocabulary. Language is a key marker of human beings, and as Jewish human beings our language is Torah. Building on a career of academic scholarship, Fishbane here takes a leap and a risk. In a forum at the University of Chicago, he himself described scholarship as (sometimes) “a sophisticated form of ventriloquism.” To do theology “demands absolute honesty” and the challenge is whether “you dare to speak in your own voice.”

Believing that this work is worthy of serious attention, and in the hope of generating conversation around its themes, I have invited several contributors to offer different points of view on Sacred Attunement. Kenneth Seeskin looks for a stronger embrace of a philosophy of transcendence. Elliot Wolfson analyzes some of the philosophy in the background of Fishbane’s theology, and points, at the end of his essay, to the question of whether silence might not exceed any attempt at a coherent theology. I offer a few thoughts of my own, and Laura Lieber presents a thoughtful and admiring tribute to her doktorvater.

I was delighted when Michael Fishbane generously offered to respond, and so his comments appear at the end of our symposium, in hopes of “continuing the conversation.”

Notes

2. Michael Fishbane, “Dean’s Forum” (Divinity School, University of Chicago, March 31, 2010).
Sacred Attunement: More Transcendence

My overriding impression of this book is best expressed by Maimonides in the Introduction of the Guide of the Perplexed: “Know that whenever one of the perfect wishes to mention, either orally or in writing, something he understands of these secrets [the true meaning of obscure passages in the Torah], he is unable to explain with complete clarity and coherence even the portion that he has apprehended.” Granted that “perfect” is too strong a term. Still anyone familiar with contemporary Jewish theology will recognize that Fishbane sits atop the field. As the book jacket makes clear, Sacred Attunement strives to be nothing less than a comprehensive Jewish theology.

Can one incorporate a comprehensive theological vision in a single book? Difficult as the task was in years past, it is even more difficult now since, as Fishbane rightly notes, we lack a single coherent or compelling worldview comparable to Neo-Platonism or Neo-Kantianism (p. 9). This leads Fishbane to conclude, “Old Plato and his heaven-soaring chariot of ideas have taken a nosedive, and the ideal essences we have projected heavenward by abstract thought have crashed into the earth of murky experiences, where we muddle along as best and as thoughtfully as we can” (p. 12). Accordingly, “The phenomenal world is all that we have” (p. 13). This was a popular sentiment in the middle of the twentieth century, when positivism was in its heyday; but much (admittedly not all) philosophy since then has been an attempt to reintroduce some form of transcendence.

The God Fishbane finds is “a supernal Font of Being” whose “informing presence [is] in all the realities of existence, the infinite modalities of divine effectivity.” From this it follows that “if all existence is not God as such, it is also not other than God” (p. 34). Not surprisingly Fishbane is most comfortable with terms implying some form of immanence (e.g., efflux, effusion, and embodiment). Later, he qualifies this a bit by claiming that “we may live at the intersection of transcendence and immanence—the transcendent immanence of world-being perceived as (actualities of) immanent transcendence” (pp. 109–10). More fully, “God is the all-encompassing ground of the vitality that roils in the depths of nature, but also puts tenderness into the animal heart” (p. 111).

Thus far philosophers will detect the voice of Spinoza, whose “God or nature” is the immanent or in-dwelling cause of all things. Unlike Spinoza, however, Fishbane argues that eventually we come to
experience a rupture in the ordinariness of experience as with an overwhelming vista or sound, sudden death or love, or artistic creations. Accordingly, “We then shudder before what is given to us from the fullness of phenomenal existence, manifesting mysteries of the surge of things at the core of world-being” (p. 19). On the basis of Exodus 3:14, God is the eternal “Shall-Be.” Though God’s ways are not human ways, “they also pass through the human realm and are thereby affected by it” (p. 112) (italics in original).

How does one become attuned to this God? Chapter 2 responds by saying the answer is to be found in Torah and the ways of interpreting texts: p’shat, d’rash, remez, and sod. There follows an instructive example of how these modes of interpretation would render Genesis 28:10–19. This is important because it is often difficult for non-Jews to appreciate the fact that in Judaism, truth is textual—as if God somehow lives in the pages of a book. But this is exactly the orientation Jews are taught to adopt.

Ditto for Chapter 3, which deals with religious practice. Here we learn how one joins heaven and earth or “the illimitable transcendence of Divinity” with “the experience of God’s immanent actuality” through prayer, Shabbat rest, and acts of kindness (chesed) (pp. 123–24). It is with down to earth subjects like these that Fishbane hits his stride. One cannot help but conclude that one is reading the reflections of someone who is both learned and deeply serious about what he is writing. That alone makes the book worth reading. In closing, Fishbane admits that the task of theology is lifelong. In his words: “It is a lifelong attempt to overcome the trance-torpor of mere existence, and become attuned to ‘the dearest freshness deep down things’ (Hopkins)—surging from the depths of God’s Godhood” (p. 206).

The problem with this book occurs if one wants to move beyond experiential theology, where Fishbane is at home, to theoretical. Then I fear his rhetoric begins to sound evasive. If Maimonides is right, sooner or later this will happen to all of us. The question is how soon or how late. In the end, I wish Fishbane had not rejected the Platonic tradition so easily and seen that it is not for nothing that generations of Jewish thinkers from Philo to Levinas found inspiration in a worldview that stresses transcendence above all else.

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Sacred Attunement: Toward Silence

A central motif that reverberates throughout Michael Fishbane’s Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology is the conviction that the religious imagination is a “bimodal consciousness,” an idea that is enunciated in terms of the distinction made by the French philosopher Jean Wahl, between le transcendance immanente and l’immanence transcendante. Building on Wahl’s language, Fishbane notes:

The lines of these perceptions of transcendence, shining through the forms of worldly immanence, which so variously impress themselves on the human spirit, run outward infinitely. They gather nowhere and everywhere. Theology calls this unsayable ground God. It is a word that focuses the mind and heart. But it is only a cipher for something more radically Other. This is the transcendence of transcendence. For if the first saves the phenomena, grounding them in something “More” (than mere human perceptions), the second saves God (both the word and the reality) from being delimited by human language and consciousness.

Whereas Wahl deployed the notion of self-transcending transcendence to denote the descent of the transcendent into immanence, Fishbane’s “transcendence of transcendence” signals the radical alterity of the transcendent, the irreducible otherness that cannot be properly named or conceptualized, the element of divinity that is ontically distinct from the beings of the world. Even so, the main thrust of Wahl’s approach is evident in the contention of Fishbane that it is the task of one engaged in the divine covenant to “actualize the principles of Sinai,” the historical locus of Revelation, which symbolizes the “junction of heaven and earth.” Through religious commitment, therefore, “we may live at the intersection of transcendence and immanence—the transcendent immanence of world-being perceived as (actualities of) immanent transcendence.”

Fishbane does not elaborate the philosophical details that undergird Wahl’s taxonomy, but to understand his own theological orientation it would be helpful to the reader to fill this lacuna. According to Wahl, human existence is defined by a tension that endures between two forms of immediacy, “the transcendent immanence of perception and the immanent transcendence of ecstasy.” The former is correlated, moreover, with the silence of positive ontology “in which the mind is nourished by things,” and the latter with the silence of
negative ontology, the “mystical event” or the mystery, wherein the “mind achieves union with its own highest point, which is at the same time the highest point of the world.” Wahl thus categorizes his thinking as the “dialectic of realism,” which is to be contrasted with both the Platonic and Hegelian forms of dialectic, insofar as it is predicated on “an affirmation of the reality of the contingent, and of the contingency of the necessary.” Rejecting the idealist position, Wahl maintains that there can be “no reflection except upon what is not-reflection, no consciousness but of the unconscious. Before I think, there is always something—that which I think . . . and that which is thought about did exist before it was thought.”

The realism espoused by Wahl is not characterized by a homogeneity whereby all entities are conceived as existing substantively on the one plane of three-dimensional extension. In concert with Whitehead, the nature of substance is determined by concrescence and the complex web of interrelationality. He does maintain, however, that the dialectic guides the mind from the realm of coalesced and concretized beings to the Absolute, “conceived more as intensity than totality,” the “nameless One,” the ineffable that comprises a plurality of ineffables, each of which is concomitantly limited and unlimited. From this vantage point, we can speak of a dialectical progression from the things of this world to the “existence of a transcending reality.” The dialectic, therefore, is “explained by a reality that transcends it,” the real that “refuses a purely intellectual contact and eludes it.” Alternatively expressed, the transcendent is the “utmost point” where objectivity and subjectivity “cannot be known apart from each other and even must be annihilated in this movement of thought that strives to approach nearer and nearer to things.”

In a tone reminiscent of many mystics, Wahl depicts the transcending movement of consciousness paradoxically as “a self-accomplishment which is at the same time self-destruction, a failure that is triumph.” The negative ontology of mystical ecstasy does not entail belief in an “objective nothing,” for the nothing that is attained, the essential negativity, is the transcendence, the extreme point of thought where thought reaches its own limits, the terminus ad quem, the “movement towards” an absolute that, as Plato already made clear in the first two hypotheses of the Parmenides, is both separate from and unifies all things. The two facets of the One correspond to the two forms of transcendence demarcated respectively as transascendence and transdescendence. The former is the metaphysical
movement toward the transcendent that is beyond logos and thematization and the latter is a movement “directed toward immanence, whereby the transcendence transcends itself. Perhaps the greatest transcendence is that which consists of transcending the transcendence, that is to say, of falling back into immanence.” Wahl thus refers to the “second immanence” that appears “after the destroyed transcendence.” Lest one think that implied here is a pantheistic or acosmic reduction of the transcendent to the immanent, it is important to note that Wahl immediately qualifies the aforementioned statement by noting that transcendence “is never completely destroyed, never completely transcended.” Hence, it is described positively as resting in the “background of spirit like the idea of a lost paradise,” the bereavement for which generates the hope and longing for a presence that constitutes the “value of our attachment to the here-below.” As Deleuze and Guattari correctly observed, the immanence in Wahl’s thinking, as that of religious authority more generally, can be compared to a “terraced fountain where water can briefly immanate on each level but on condition that it comes from a higher source and falls lower down.”

In agreement with Wahl, Fishbane is keenly aware that contemporary theology cannot simply revert to some form of otherworldliness, whether the Platonic ideal forms or the Kantian noumena. Denying that retreats of this sort are any longer tenable, we are condemned to “muddle along as best and as thoughtfully as possible” in the “murky experiences” of the phenomenal realm. And yet, unlike those who would affirm a pantheistic or panentheistic spirituality on this basis, Fishbane is not willing to concede that “all that remains is some mode of natural piety” (Sacred Attunement, p. 12). Theology, in his view, is meaningful only if it is “grounded in earthly experience and understood from within its forms,” but, in a manner akin to, although surpassing, the aesthetic sensibility, it also must point to infinities that are “intuited as more than a trace of the elusiveness of experience . . . the given (or ‘shadow’) of an unsayable, and insensate, and utterly transcendent Giving, to which we can only orient ourselves in silence.” The transcendence that Fishbane affirms, therefore, is to be sought in the “unfolding of the Godhead into world-being” (p. 14), so that the person of faith intuits “God’s informing presence in all the realities of existence, the infinite modalities of divine effectivity” (p. 35; on God’s “all-shaping effectivity,” see also p. 203). The sensibility of religious piety encompasses the
fullness that is the “illimitable transcendence of Divinity, the Life of all life, ever exceeding human knowledge and grasp,” and the “experience of God’s immanent actuality as the Life of the life we find in the world” (p. 123). It is in this sense that Fishbane situates theology “at the border of the known and unknown, of the manifest and the concealed. It is at this nexus that the self seeks God.” The excess of all that transpires in space-time extends to the “utmost depths of Being and beyond,” for “all our worldly experiences are prismatic revelations of a deeper elementariness,” and hence “through a wholly natural attitude toward the world a deeper phenomenality is disclosed.” Following the dominant cosmological approach of medieval kabbalistic theosophy, Fishbane envisions the material world not as illusionary but as allusive, the physical points to a more profound spiritual dimension but the latter is accessible only through the former in a way similar to the hermeneutical claim that the esoteric meaning of the biblical text is attainable only through the cloak of the exoteric meaning. In the final analysis, Fishbane’s theology embraces the paradox well-rooted in the mystical speculation of kabbalists and Chasidic masters: “if all existence is not God as such, it is also not other than God, Life of all life” (p. 34).

The ideal of theology is essentially the attunement of the heart to the “ultimate Source of all things,” the “most primal Depth (beyond the Beyond of all conception).” Indeed, the word “God” is itself nothing but the “thought-image of a supernal Font of Being” (p. 34), the transpersonal infinity that surpasses any imaginary construct of the divine person (pp. 158–59). Understandably, Fishbane continues to utilize the figurative trope of the gift to depict the mystery of God’s effectivity (pp. 38, 42, 123, 131–33, 136, 166, 204), an act of bestowing that is related mythopoeically to the giving of the Torah, which is rendered metaphorically as “God’s absolute gift and giving of world-reality,” the “sacred gift of freedom, grounded in God’s goodness, allowing all things to be and to happen” (pp. 158–59). Technically speaking, the anthropomorphization of the generative force of divine transcendence along these lines has the potential of becoming a “verbal idol” (p. 86). The challenge before us is whether in a postmodern era we are compelled to presume that the giving of being necessitates the image of a gift from “God’s ever-effectual Godhood,” which Fishbane relates to the “no nameable name” revealed to Moses at the epiphany of the Burning Bush, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh” (“I shall be as I shall be”), abbreviated
as “Shall-Be,” an “epithet of unconditioned occurrence” that ensues from the transcendent, primordial reality (p. 53; see pp. 54–62, 109–14, 117–19, 122–24). The notion of the gift, so-conceived, requires a transcendental subjectivity, and while this subjectivity may be cast apophatically as unknowable and enigmatic, a being beyond being, it is a being nonetheless that is depicted theologically in kataphatic terms. For Fishbane, the worshiper can address the inscrutable transcendence as the “Lord of all Being” (YHVH) because he is committed to the belief that the “(impersonal) vitality of Being passes through the human sphere of life, and as it infuses this sphere there is a touching of heaven and earth in the (personal) life of the individual” (p. 122). It follows that the particularities of the phenomenal real, the “specific concrescences of existence,” are “experienced as the gift of God’s all-unnamable ‘Shall-Be’” (p. 124). But is this inevitably so? Could we not speak of a givenness without resorting to the locution of the gift?

Lest there be any misunderstanding, let me be perfectly clear that Fishbane is well aware that theology is, first and foremost, a “construct of thought and imagination” (p. 32). Needless to say, this is not meant to suggest that the Divine is nothing more than a projection of the human psyche. What is intended is that theology is a “symbolic form which takes our experiences in the natural world and reshapes them” such that we may cross over “to the numinous qualities of the unsayable origin inhering in every moment of existence” (pp. 33–34). But using this very measure, we can say that the variation in our understanding of reality serves as a barometer to gauge the changing perceptions on the nature of godliness and even more pertinently the manner in which we imagine what cannot be imagined. Perhaps the present demand is to overcome the metaphorical representation of transcendence, to get beyond the double bind of the anthropomorphic configuration of the Divine and the theomorphic configuration of the human. The exigency of the moment may very well summon the need to subjugate the theistic personification of God and the corresponding egoistic depiction of self, a task that demands a sweeping and uncompromising purification of the idea of the infinite from all predication. What is necessary, although by no means easy to attain, is the termination of all modes of representation, even the representation of the nonrepresentable, a heeding of silence that exceeds the atheological as much as it exceeds the theological.
Notes

1. Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), x. In Fishbane’s text, the two expressions are given as *le transcendance immanente* and *l’immanence transcendente*, but, according to the original French, the latter should be *l’immanence transcendant*, and I have corrected the text accordingly. See Jean Wahl, *Existence humaine et transcendance* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1944), 10.


3. Ibid., 109–10. See ibid., 128–29, where Jacob’s ladder is interpreted as symbolic of the conjunction of immanence and transcendence. (Further references to *Sacred Attunement* will be noted parenthetically.)


6. Ibid., 503.


9. Wahl, “Realism,” 502: “So the subjective leads us to the objective, as the objective brought us to the subjective.” See ibid., 504: “And both perception and ecstasy are unity of subject and object. And dialectic is between the two. It always implies distance between subject and object, and this distance is consciousness.”

10. Ibid., 505.

11. Ibid., 504 n. 10.

12. Ibid., 505.

BOOK REVIEWS


**Sacred Attunement: Text, Body, Spirit**

*Sacred Attunement* “is an attempt to ‘do’ theology in a dark and disorienting time—a time sunk in the mire of modernity” (p. ix). It is clearly a work that has taken shape over a lifetime of reflection. One imagines the professor late at night in the solitude of his study, reflecting, formulating, reworking fragments into a provisional whole—provisional because any such attempt in our age, chastened by the profoundly disappointing failures of modernity, must be conscious of its incompleteness, modest in its claims.

Rosenzweig is indeed the starting point. But where Rosenzweig finds his “breakthrough” in “the stark consciousness of mortality,” Fishbane seeks meaning in “the consciousness of natality” (a term he owes to Hannah Arendt) and “reborn mindfulness” (p. ix). But lest this contrast be drawn too simply, we note that Rosenzweig ends the *Star of Redemption* with “into life.” *Sacred Attunement* ends on a note of resignation before the inevitability of death. But here again the simple contrast is misleading, for “Death and life are one. Together they express infinitude” (p. 204). And in the meantime, which is where we live our lives, Fishbane advocates mindfulness, attention, and attunement: “To lose attention is to slip into a mindless habitue that disregards the mystery of the vastness...The readiness to stand firm in the vastness of existence is the spiritual alternative” (pp. 41, 43).

The substance of the book articulates both a “hermeneutical theology” (p. xiv) and a “performative theology.” Hermeneutical theology means a constant attention to the ways in which our texts, the Written and the Oral Torahs—for remember, Torah is the language through which Jewish human beings gesture toward the Infinite—begin to reveal, layer after layer, the Reality that lies at the heart of All. Alongside a hermeneutic theology there must also be a performative theology, for how could it be Jewish without mitzvah? The attunement of the title requires both close reading and acts of loving-kindness.
The work is filled with close readings of various texts, the genre in which Fishbane has excelled since his very earliest work. These alone are worth the price of admission. Chapter 2, “A Jewish Hermeneutical Theology,” is a masterful exposition of the levels of Pardes. Centered on Jacob’s dream of a stairway (Gen. 28:10–19), Fishbane’s discussion shows how the approach of p’shat requires “attentiveness to the details” and “patient subordination of the self.” The p’shat is never simple, but demands “attuned responsiveness” (p. 71). The level of d’rash, in contrast, “is less a subjugation of the self . . . than an active engagement with [Scripture’s] inner eros . . . [and] focuses on the duration of Sinai in time, at each and every moment of its creative reception” (p. 75). “Through imaginative attention” (p. 75), “we hear what we need to hear” (p. 77).

Fishbane goes on to state that “The Oral Torah is revealed as a species of the Written one” (p. 78). Here I would like to suggest that the opposite is also made manifest: the Written Torah is shown to be a particular instance of an ever-flowing Oral Torah. This is already alluded to by Fishbane’s recovery of the concept of the Torah k’lulah. Scripture itself attests to at least two hermeneutical revolutions—that of Deuteronomy and the ongoing study of Torah (see pp. 48–49). Sinai remains the prime reference point for Jewish understanding, but there stands behind or beyond it a Torah even more inclusive. The phrase “Torah k’lulah” comes from a kabbalistic text attributed to “Rabbi Isaac the Old.” Fishbane expands the term to suggest “the absolute and existential fullness of world-being” (see note on p. 219). It becomes a major trope in Sacred Attunement, and a compelling way to indicate the Full Reality toward which language in general, and the language of Torah in particular, can only gesture.

To return, then, to the discussion of Pardes, remez (hint) may operate on the level of metaphoric reading, or even be similar to dream interpretation: There are always deeper meanings below the surface. Maimonides was a master of a certain kind of remez. “As sight is to insight, so is peshat to remez. One simply [!] has to know what to look for and how” (p. 87). Sod (secret) is the approach closest to the mystical. Whereas Levinas remained suspicious of all mysticisms, Fishbane is open to the layers of insight that close readings of kabbalistic texts can reveal. Sod requires one “to seek a spiritual alignment” with the language of scripture (p. 95); one enters a “metacommunicative dimension” (p. 97).
Access, insofar as there can be such, to the Torah k’lulah surely involves all of the hermeneutic approaches, which are never completely separable from one another. However strenuous and creative one’s interpretive efforts, the Rabbis remind us that “Scripture never loses its plain sense” (p. 104). Whatever else Scripture may mean, it always also bears meaning according to the p’shat.

Fishbane’s discussion suggests an analogy, a strong sense in which the p’shat of the text corresponds to the physical doing of mitzvot. Mitzvot can be, and often have been interpreted in terms of symbolic meaning and, for the mystics, are seen as effecting tikkun in the higher realms of the sfirot. But for all of that, they never lose their concrete importance as actual deeds performed in this world. They are significant in themselves and, at the same time, they are a means for us, embodied as we are, to keep ourselves attuned to the sacred.

Mitzvot are the physical manifestation of the intellectual/spiritual attunement achieved through prayer and the study of Torah. Fishbane’s description of this in chapter 3, “Religious Practice and Forms of Attention,” is that “religion is the gravitational settling of thought into behavior . . ., the nexus where physicality becomes spirit” (p. 108). Mitzvot connect our “twofold consciousness” and create “a responsive and dutiful ‘joining’ of heaven and earth with spiritual awareness” (p. 124).

What began as a theological “ethical will” addressed to his sons has expanded into a theological testimony that is either the culmination of the Rosenzweig-Buber-Levinas trajectory of twentieth century thought, or, as I hope, the opening statement of what comes next.

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Sacred Attunement: A Tribute

In the Acknowledgments to Sacred Attunement, which conclude the volume, Michael Fishbane notes that he originally conceived of this series of essays as “a spiritual testament” for his family, particularly his two sons, Eitan and Elisha. While the scope and audience of the work broaden beyond that of a familial ethical will, the intimate tone of the work remains. True, this personal tone is subtle and may be most audible to those of us who have had the privilege of studying with and being mentored by Professor Fishbane. After all, as Rashi teaches (in his commentary to Num. 3:1): “Whoever teaches Torah
to another’s child, Scripture regards that person as a parent”—and for students of Fishbane, the term “doktorvater” is much more than an archaic holdover from German academic parlance. This truth was brought home to me again when I first read Sacred Attunement. As I read the volume, reading slowly to allow myself both to work through the content and savor my memories of the author in the classroom, I had the distinct sense that—through the tremendous personal and intellectual generosity of my beloved doktorvater—I was being included alongside Eitan and Elisha as a recipient of a superb gift. Professor Fishbane’s theological reflections are the product of a lifetime of profound thought—rooted in texts but far more than just “of” texts; the teachings contained within Sacred Attunement promise to demand of me, in turn, many years of active response. This slender volume is, as one colleague of mine put it, a book perhaps written for “the wise child” of the Passover seder. It is not a simple work, and at times one has the sense that it articulates the nearly ineffable; and upon first read, and sometimes subsequent rereading, at times I worry that I am still the simple child or the one who doesn’t even know what to ask. And yet, what delights me is that we have all been invited to share in this feast of texts, exegesis, and meaning.

My response to Sacred Attunement reflects my experiences both as a Fishbane student and as a teacher of the texts and traditions of Judaism. Reading this volume was a reminder to me of all the best parts of both graduate school and being a professor. It captures the energy and sheer, overwhelming meaningfulness of the texts, which compelled me to devote my life to their study; and it echoes the wonder and privilege and challenge of standing before students and attempting to convey the same to them. Reading Sacred Attunement is like attending a master-class in Jewish thought as lived practice: Instead of a seminar on the Song of Songs, the M’chilta, or the Zohar, it is a meditation on “the big picture,” on the intersection between text and self, and text and world. The volume is saturated with quotations and allusions to sources ancient and modern, secular and religious, Jewish and otherwise, much the way a conversation flows. (Sources are provided in endnotes but not indicated in the body of the text, which lends the work a free-flowing sense of presence but conceals some of its academic bona fides from readers who neglect the back matter.) Close readings of diverse texts (biblical, midrashic, kabbalistic, and philosophical, often overlapping and intersecting) texture the work, as does careful, clear thinking about textuality: the
relationships among Written Torah, Oral Torah, and Torah k’lulah—the unfolding “life of all life” that these texts embed, encode, suggest, invoke, and even demand. This is a theology that has in it room for the aesthetic and the numinous. For all that it appears to be written in prose, the language of the volume is highly poetic. Poetry, as I learned with Professor Fishbane, is the organic rhetoric for saying and unsaying and for articulating the (nigh) ineffable.

Perhaps what meant the most to me in this book, however, was its integrity, intellectual and emotional. The content of the volume conveys both perception and performance: perception, which is individual; and performance, which takes us beyond the self. Sacred Attunement does not offer a passive, heady theology that is content to fill our minds with impressive interpretations and philosophical insights. For all its intellectualism, it is a work that compels us to act. Or, to paraphrase Fishbane’s understanding, “The better we read, the better we live”—and vice versa. To learn and to do: This is what it means to live at the intersection of immanence and transcendence. We cannot study this material and be unmoved by it. The meaningfulness of our texts and traditions yields a sense of obligation. It is a deeply thoughtful, subtly graceful call to action.

Duty, as understood by Sacred Attunement, is not equated simply with adherence to traditional mitzvot; as I read it—and certainly as I “translate” it for my own teaching—it is a call not to “observance” in the narrow sense (although its readings of halachic sources and traditions are inspiring) but, more broadly, to active, passionate engagement with the world—to attentiveness, to engagement, to feeling when it is often easier to succumb to numbness. The opening words to the volume note that we live “in a dark and disorienting time… The mirror of the world reflects back to us our willful epistemologies, our suspicion of values, and the rank perversions of the human heart. Like Kafka, we prowl aimlessly around the debris of old Sinais, in a wasteland of thought” (p. ix). Fishbane writes because he seeks to break through this enervating despair. It is a work of theology that opens us outwards rather than directing us inwards. Attentiveness—to texts, to our surroundings, to our actions, to the world—offers a starting point for finding a way through. And it is, perhaps, this sense of possibility, the promise of hope, the implication of meaningfulness generally speaking and concretely, distinctively manifested through Jewish texts that I can share with my own students, varied as their backgrounds are. Whether these students are cynics or optimists,
religiously identified or secular, materialist in inclination or “spiritual,” the dynamic that Fishbane depicts between reading and doing, between meaning and meaningfulness, between affirmation and obligation, can be compelling. The vision of *Sacred Attunement* is in accord with what many of them come to the academic study of Religion hoping for: not confessional bias, or dogma, or history, but a sense of wisdom that will be empowering and ennobling and not narcissistic. The act of reading—so pervasive in the lives of my students—becomes in *Sacred Attunement* a transformative practice and not merely a recovery of archival information. The idea that study can and ought to be such an active and world-shaping act resonates with my students who are both confronted by challenging syllabi and rarely satisfied with the status quo.

In the Epilogue to *Sacred Attunement*, Fishbane writes: “This is covenant theology, brought to mind and kept in mind by hermeneutical practice. Keeping ourselves attuned to the many interpretative possibilities at the core of life and guided by the standards of scripture, one may effectuate divine reality—bringing God to a human presence through ourselves, just here in the midst of the vastness. *Raza de-razin /stima de-khol stimin* [Mystery of mysteries; the most concealed truth of all.]” (p. 209). Let us pause and consider what this statement says. *This is a covenant theology*: It is a theology of relationship, engagement, mutual and reciprocal duties. It summons everyone to fulfill their obligations. *It is brought to mind and kept in mind by hermeneutical practice*: It is a theology in which life and text merge, where the reading of sacred texts makes the muscles itch with the desire to act and where ancient sources continually yield up fresh insights. *One may effectuate divine reality*: It is a theology poised at the limits and intersection of immanence and transcendence, one that brings a sense of revelation close and in a transformative way. Here, at a moment in time that may seem bleak or callous, Fishbane offers a way of regaining a sense of Divine presence, not simply through the contemplation of texts but through the insights into our actions that those texts yield. All of this is a mystery, a concealed truth, but in *Sacred Attunement*, a beloved teacher (for he has taught many of us over the years already) affords us a way of seeing the apple of gold beneath the silver filigree—and a reason for striving to do so.

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Continuing the Conversation

It is with much gratitude that I have read the responses to my book Sacred Attunement and tried to think along with the writers, who have generously tried to think along with my own thoughts and offer them to a broader public for reflection. It is clear that just as writing theology is a personal enterprise, no matter how or in what way one stands within a tradition of thought, responding to a theology is equally personal and brings to the foreground one’s own matrix of ideas and values and purposes. And, of course, how much the more so is this the case when one (me) is invited to continue the conversation with the respondents? I am therefore very grateful to Laurence Edwards for this opportunity and for the thoughtful discussions he has assembled from thinkers and scholars of different proclivities: Laura Lieber, Kenneth Seeskin, Elliot Wolfson, and himself. I should like to speak to them all together, as a multifaceted prism, and thus allow their separate observations to stand on their own terms—without my push back or counterpoint on any specific issue. It should nevertheless be said that, in a number of cases (as for example on the issues of transcendence and experience), comments or critiques put forward by one person are addressed by another; and thus there is already a virtual conversation in process. I shall therefore use this opportunity to participate as another voice in this colloquy for potential readers of my theology, and hope thereby to exemplify a living theological conversation.

In the course of developing a theological statement, a person must inevitably ask, What or who has formed me? Are these influences still vital and significant? Where am I stuck and how might I move forward? What kind of religious person is possible today—as I assess this for me; and finally, What kind of religious community is possible for me, in both the narrow and broadest sense? Theology must therefore be grounded in personal acts of integrity and honesty, informed by a clear sense of context and history, and marked by a certain purposeful focus and character. We not only have experiences and reasons and traditions, but we also have them with different valences; and thus, in constructing and directing our theological lives, we must try to bring them into new interrelationships. For all we have is our forthright assessment of these matters, again and again. In terms of the fragility of words as carriers of intention, as shaped by tradition, and as ways
of orienting oneself to ideals or to possibilities, perhaps the closest genre to theology is (I believe) prayer. And just as certain seventeenth century English devotional poets deemed their prayer-poems to be “self-consuming artifacts”—formulations that serve their purposes as living events of the spirit but that cannot become fixed or formulaic—so, perhaps, theology is an enterprise of a similar sort—something that we all sense when we engage in any religious act or reflection.

What we want and need is actuality, not dead metaphors; what we want and need is concrete thought, not abstractions developed or sustained independent of life itself. Or at least that is what I want and need, without ignoring the fact that our thinking occurs within traditions of thought, and that our lives are enacted within traditions of action and value.

I have therefore taken my own standpoint within the flowing tide of life, trying to awaken from mindlessness and habitue to new beginnings (called “natality”) and the surpassing heights and depths that may be opened up thereby. Experience—or, lived concreteness—is the primary touchstone here; and it is just here that one may move toward theology as a genre of spiritual reflection and evaluation. Starting from this experiential base, I have attempted to point out the great heights of transcendence, even the very transcendence of transcendence, that may suddenly be disclosed and thereby prevent the facile idolatries of self-serving constructs of thought; and also indicate that transcendence sinks, even plunges, into the depths of our tangible and thinkable world, such that there are transcendent depths within our worldly immanence—an immanence that is not flat and just there, but has mystery and ever outflowing possibilities.

I have tried to locate a language of theology (and of God) within this inter-space, this space of crossing; and the kind of mentality I proposed that might correlate with this two-foldness (of immanence and transcendence) is a “bimodal mentality”—a consciousness of transcendence beyond and below every form and formulation that we may sense or speak about. This “reality” cannot readily become theoretical or permanently abstract, for it requires a repeated enactment of thought and wonder amidst the overflow of life, in which our ideas are embedded, in fact. And it cannot remain a wholly nonrepresentational sensibility, beyond all predication, because it arises in and through the phenomena of life through which we try to orient ourselves and direct our minds in
honest thoughtfulness. Thus, even as we strive to purify our minds and transcend predications for some deep silence of the Whole, the thrust of existence casts us back to the things themselves and their in-breaking challenges. In such moments, the best we might hope for, I think, is a sense of this purer transcendence at the depth and borders of these very life forms, themselves perhaps inescapable.

There are many things one can do in small groups of like-minded persons, honing certain conceptual structures (or theoretical constructs); and there are some things one must do in radical aloneness, honing certain interior virtues (like meditative silence). But if theology is to be part of a living, historical tradition, it must take the risks of inherited forms—its texts and practices. It is for this reason that I have tried to situate thought and integrity (regarding experience, thought, and action) at the nexus of reading sacred sources (I proposed a reinterpretation of the fourfold method as a new way of engaging the content of these materials at the crossing points between the sayable and the unsayable, the doable and the not doable) and within the actuality of our religious practices (these being forms for cultivating and enacting our attention to the world, enfolded in mystery). These settings can become the occasions of risk and challenge—where the vitalities of language and action are engaged and honestly assessed. And, by doing all this within a tradition, what we may gain is a personal engagement with the possibilities and resources of a collective, historical framework. Nor should this be minimized—first, because of the importance of finding one’s place within the communal whole; but also because of the importance of living with others who are similarly seeking to cultivate their religious thought and practice. We need each other as fellow travelers, offering different models, who may collectively help to enlarge the range of the possible within a given tradition.

The complexities of modernity, offering us numerous resources and life values, make it inevitable that we all stand (as distinct selves) somewhat at the margins of Judaism, no matter how committed we are, aiming inward—trying to bring the fullness and difference of our lives toward the multivalent sources of Judaism, and also trying to be open to their challenges in one way or another. Only in this attempt, perhaps, may Judaism remain a living and transmissible entity—from the ground up—and also be a place where we may cultivate a readiness for the in-breaking of the (allusive and so elusive) transcendent in our lives—in silent receptivity and with personal
integrity at every point of its possible manifestation. The attempt to hold firm in this process is what I defined as *emunah*.

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*American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction*

by David J. Zucker


The purpose of this review is for the “old timers” among us to indulge in some nostalgia and for those who were ordained since the late 1980s to be introduced to a cultural phenomenon that flourished a generation ago in America, namely, works of fiction about rabbis. This book by our colleague David Zucker was not given sufficient critical attention when it was first published over a decade ago. But the time has come to give it a second reading. Rabbi Zucker did a great deal of research on the subject, the result of which is this in-depth study of the American rabbinate as reflected in works of fiction since 1950, interspersed with data about actual rabbis and issues related to the rabbinate and to congregational life. It should be of interest to all of us: for rabbis it provides a unique perspective on our life and work; for non-rabbis it offers a perspective on Jewish life in those years.

As the author of one of the novels quoted from in the book, I find myself wondering about two things: first, what prompted me to write a novel about my experience as a rabbi back in the 1960s and 1970s; and second, why did we have so many works of fiction back in those days about rabbis, more than a few of which became best sellers, and then since the mid-1980s such books have all but disappeared?

Several answers come to mind. Novels by and about Jews were extremely popular in those years. For a while, the triumvirate of Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth dominated American literature. Moreover, Jewish congregational life in America was mostly going suburban, and rabbis were caught up in many conflicts that resulted from dealing with new synagogues mostly without roots and without a strong Jewish identity. In addition, America was struggling through some profound social revolutions, starting with the Civil Rights movement, the anti–Vietnam War movement, and finally the Women’s Rights movement. We
Jews were quite active in all those movements for change, and literary expression went hand in hand with social activism.

In his Prologue, the author sums up the state of the American rabbinate in those years as follows:

While it is a difficult profession, as Murray Polner indicated in his book *Rabbi: An American Experience* (1977), “the rabbi nonetheless continues to play a central, if reduced, role in American Jewish life. But I believe he [!] is the most significant person in that life today and for the years ahead.” (p. xvi)

The most widely read novels about a rabbi in the 1960s were Harry Kemelman’s mysteries, which began with *Friday the Rabbi Slept Late* (1964). They were quite entertaining, particularly if reading mystery novels was your “bag,” but they also provided a good deal of accurate information about rabbis and Judaism to a much wider audience than the readers of serious Jewish books. I read a couple of them and I enjoyed them. But what still sticks in my memory from those days are some of the episodes in the comic novels of our late colleague Herbert Tarr. In *Heaven Help Us* (1968), he describes congregational life on Long Island in those years, where I spent seven years (1970–77) as a pulpit rabbi and commiserated with many a colleague (of all the three main Jewish movements) on the trials and tribulations of Long Island rabbis. I still tell people about Tarr’s description of a Long Island bar mitzvah, where the chopped liver was singing the theme song from the movie *Exodus*. Such stories helped relieve our many frustrations in the pulpit in those years.

Not possessing Kemelman’s talent (and interest in) mystery novel writing or Tarr’s talent as a humorist, when I wrote my own period piece, *The Rabbi and the Nun* (1991), I tried to combine a love story between two young idealistic clergy with an exposé on my experience as an assistant rabbi in the late 1960s in one of the leading Reform congregations in America. It was my second and last published novel. I have since turned to nonfiction, most recently to biblical scholarship, and I am glad that my novelistic salad days are behind me. I was, therefore, quite surprised when I first discovered Zucker’s book and found out that my novel provided the author with some useful information about the rabbinate. It included this comment about rabbinic training at a fictionalized HUC-JIR:
At that school each student is free to pursue his own ideas and beliefs within the broad philosophical spectrum of Liberal Judaism, yet all the students and the professors are bound by a common purpose, which is a total commitment to Jewish survival and the renewal of Judaism as a prophetic faith. (p. 66)

The great Reform rabbis of my youth, men like Stephen Wise and Abba Hillel Silver, sought to cast themselves in the mould of the great Hebrew prophets. They performed heroic deeds of social justice and Jewish peoplehood, and when their own congregants complained that they were spending more time saving the world than attending to their own pastoral duties, they were able to silence their critics. All of this began to change in the 1960s, yet many of us at HUC-JIR, imbued with the spirit of prophetic Judaism, were not quite aware of it, and once we occupied our own pulpits we began to run into conflicts with our lay boards over issues of social causes and rabbinic services. I still recall attending my brother-in-law’s ordination in the 1970s in Cincinnati, about ten years after my own, in which the main speaker, a professor from the Cincinnati school, told the newly ordained class to be practical and to act more like priests ministering to the needs of their congregation than prophets out to save the world. This, I believe, was the great turning point in the nature of the Reform rabbinate in my lifetime.

Particularly enlightening are the chapters about women rabbis, the rabbi’s family, noncongregational rabbis, and rabbis viewing the rabbinate. Considering the rapid and radical changes in Jewish life in America in the last thirty years, such as the attitude of young Jews toward the synagogue, the state of Israel, and Jewish learning and tradition, as well as the shift in the demographics of our congregations and movements, I am tempted to urge the author to write a sequel to this book. I am afraid he will not be able to draw this time on such a wealth of literary material about rabbis and the rabbinate, but there are certainly plenty of articles, essays, blogs, etc., and a constant flow of information on the Internet. The times they are a-changin’, and we rabbis are changing with them.