Living in the Throes of Paradox

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> "I waited for some answers to many theological questions but answers not as abstract as in a theological treatise, just on that border between the intellect and our imagination, a border so rarely explored today in religious thinking."
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> —C. Milosz, in a letter to Thomas Merton

I. Introduction: Religious Sensibility

Abraham Joshua Heschel sits comfortably between philosophy and poetry. His classic, *God in Search of Man*, provides lyrical perception and insight, religious and philosophic, not to be forgotten. A critic, skeptical of Heschel's preference for poetry over theology, remarked, "You think it's all just poetry?!" He responded (roughly), "*Just* poetry? What could be more elevated."

Some years back, having returned to religious life in part inspired by Heschel, I was attending some lectures on Maimonides at UCLA. The contrast between Heschel and Maimonides, a philosopher's philosopher, was stark. With Heschel I was exploring themes in Midrash, its parables and imaginative flights, some by

way of biblical interpretation, some by way of reflection on religious life, religious ideas. For the midrashic imagination, God is anthropomorphically conceived: He nurtures, bestows gifts of love, He forgives, He judges righteously…. On the darker side, He is subject to anger, sometimes rage, to jealousy (for example, in Hosea, directed at Israel and her lovers). These lists can of course be lengthened.

Heschel's view of prophecy is especially pertinent to the contrast with Maimonides. The prophet is, for Heschel, in a unique position vis-à-vis God and humanity. The prophet "gets" us; he knows from inside, as it were, what it's like for us, what we think, what and how we feel. But, unlike the rest of us, he also gets God (much better than we do); the prophet understands, empathizes with, the divine pathos. The costs of such dual empathy are substantial. The prophet lives in painful elevation; despite his blessings he is appreciated by few, resented by many.

I'm not sure it's accurate to report Maimonides as taking such views of God and prophecy to be heretical. But it's not off by much. Maimonides is an Aristotelean; he takes Aristotle's God and the Jewish God to be one and the same, surely not subject to any such human ways. Maimonides' anti-anthropomorphism is as strict as it can be, on a par with that of the modern arch-naturalist Spinoza. The comparison with goes deep. Maimonides's great philosophic work, *Guide of the Perplexed*, is in part a translation manual, one that reveals the anthropomorphic biblical imagery to be nothing more than what Bishop Berkeley called "speaking with the vulgar," (all the while "thinking with the learned").[1]

The Maimonides lectures at UCLA were given by Rabbi David Hartman, *z'l*. Hartman painted a vivid picture: The religious outlook of the *Guide* rejects the idea of God as caring, loving, forgiving, or angry, vengeful, and the rest. God was beyond all that, a Perfect Being, remote rather than available, for example, for interaction. God's remoteness was not that of someone hiding (the Bible speaks of God hiding His face). God's remoteness was more like that of a mathematical equation. Perhaps impersonal would be more to the point.

How in the world, I wanted to know, might these two conceptions reside in the same religious tradition? How could Maimonides fail to engage in a more human way, a less reductive way, with the powerful anthropomorphic text of Tanakh, not to speak of the sometimes hyper-anthropomorphic Midrash, the rabbinic religious imagination? Seeing God as loving, as caring about us, about justice—these are no throwaways; they seem central to Jewish tradition, and more generally to religious life.[2]

Hartman responded that Maimonides and the midrashic imagination represent different “religious sensibilities.” The phrase, not common currency in my experience, seized my imagination. The idea increasingly took on importance. One might pray—in the same pew—with one who inhabits a very different religious sensibility. One might experience the world through the biblical religious imagination; one’s fellow might eschew anthropomorphism. Or, one might see the divine in terms of the metaphysically supernatural and the other’s approach might be more naturalistic. At the same time, one’s religious sensibility might well be shared by another in a very different religious tradition. Religious sensibility seemed to me, and still does, important, and relatively underexplored.

Religious sensibility, as I conceive it, is analogous to musical sensibility.[3] “Sensibility” is related of course to “sense” (think: sense organs, but also “my sense of him”) and “sensation.” It’s something like a way of sensing or a taste/preference in the realm of sense, as with musical sensibility. There is some resonance here of the bodily, something I appreciate in connection with my thinking of faith as a stance, an attitude (in an almost nautical sense) of the whole person, this as opposed to a matter of cognitive assent to a proposition. As William James suggests, religion is largely a matter of the gut, surely not purely of the head.

II.Rabbinic Sensibility and the Rabbinic Project

Maimonides’s religious sensibility, at least as suggested in the *Guide,* is grounded in a philosophic outlook. It’s from philosophy, thinks Maimonides, that we know that God could not really be human-like, as described in Tanakh and Midrash. Maimonides suggests at the end of the *Guide* that the moment of solitary philosophic contemplation is *the* religious moment. This is striking; the contrast is with thinking of paradigm religious moments as standing before God in prayer—often communal prayer— or deeply engaged with talmudic issues.

The Rabbis of the talmud, skeptical about philosophy, inhabited a different sensibility, one to which Heschel’s outlook is closer. Max Kadushin, in *The Rabbinic Mind,* presents a compelling sketch: The Rabbis did not begin with a concept of God. In a way, they had no such concept, certainly not a philosophically well-developed one. What they had was their experience of God (of course against the background of the tradition and the biblical text). And that experience was of a God who loves, who provides, who cares, who is sometimes remote—at a great distance—and sometimes almost immediate, who may be angry and inscrutable; in short, the God of biblical imagination. But—and here’s the rub—that same experience yielded the sense that somehow God was

altogether beyond all of this, that He could not be so like us.

Their touchstone experience thus yields two incompatible ideas. How does one live with such paradox? Is there a resolution in the offing? And what does such paradoxical experience yield by way of religious sensibility?

There is a wonderful scene in Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters* in which a Jewish mother responds to her son's question of where God was during the Holocaust with this remark: "Max, you tell him." Max's response: "How the hell do I know why there were Nazis? I don't know how the can opener works!" It goes deep in our tradition that our understanding of God's ways is severely limited, that seeing God's back—perhaps in a rear-view mirror—is about as close as anyone gets. Buber perhaps exaggerates when he writes that while everyone can speak to God, none can speak (coherently) about Him. In in important sense, we don't know of what we speak. Accordingly, the Rabbis did not presume to resolve the paradox; nor even to address it. They had no pretensions of being theorists of God—the word is "theologian." They appear to have had little patience for (what they knew of) philosophy. They were more akin to craftsmen or artists. They lived in the throes of the paradox.

The Rabbis were developing what we now know as Jewish religious practice. After the destruction of the Temple, their task was to find a way to reclaim Jewish religious life in the absence of its former central modes of worship. They were also practitioners of that life. They were thus craftspeople/artists in two senses: first, constructing and embellishing forms of worship, and second, creatively engaging in the practices. Their faith played a vital role in both of these modes. In the first, developing the practices, their ear, their sense of what it is to serve/worship/love/stand in awe of God, was foundational. In the second, the creative engagement with the practices, they were not unlike us, their descendants, seeing the life as a vocation and attending to it in that spirit.

To see the life as a vocation is to bring to bear great focus, imagination, and energy, to engage with it with the seriousness one (ideally) brings to one's intimate relationships. No one loves quite the way anyone else does, but each (again ideally) brings himself to it with care, nuance, and focus. No one is a mother or father in quite the way others are. Parents, at their best times, do it creatively, with great attention to detail, with art one might say.

Needless to say, any such creativity—as craft or as art—requires solid grounding in the basics. In the case of actual art, say painting, one needs to know a great deal: about paint and its properties, the history of the art, and lots more. Much of the day to day, minute to minute, work tends toward the mundane. And so too

with religious life. It's at the odd moment that insight hits; insight, creativity, powerful realization and the like.[4]

I believe that the analogy with artistic endeavor goes deep. My teacher, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, used to speak of a virtue of deep engagement with Talmud: One learns to navigate life in terms of God's categories.[5] A great artist like Cezanne tries with all his soul to capture a vision. Looking back on his work he may point to various paintings, some coming closer, others not as close. *Hazal*, steeped in the tradition, were trying to capture the taste, the feel, the spirit of the Torah they inherited.

I've been describing a religious sensibility that is suggested by much in rabbinic tradition. Unlike Maimonides's way, it is not attendant to, almost a consequence of, a philosophic outlook. Rather it takes its leave from religious life and experience. From this perspective, the medieval philosophical turn will seem paradigmatic of what Wittgenstein takes to be an occupational hazard of philosophy: the attempt to illuminate by reinterpreting the subject matter in terms we are equipped to handle. Faith then gives way to belief: cognitive assent to propositions. Mystery, the sense that we are over our heads in theorizing about God, gives way to doctrine.[6], [7]

III.Truth

The dominant conception of truth among philosophers is "truth as correspondence." The idea is that a thought or a sentence is true just in case it corresponds to, matches the facts. The sentence "John is seven feet tall" (or the thought it expresses) is true just in case the person in question, John, is actually that height. Nothing mysterious here; it's very intuitive and understandable. The question is whether such an idea of truth can apply to a religious position. And if it can't, where does that leave us? We certainly want to think of our religious ways as capturing the truth.

Paramount here is what appears to be the unresolvable paradox: God's anthropomorphic properties **and** His being beyond any such human-like properties. Logically speaking, you can't have it both ways. But which is it? If Maimonides had his way, and our God became the God beyond anthropomorphism, we would have resolved the paradox. But then we lose the God who cares, forgives, with whom we live and share intimacy. Might we go the other way? Might we deny God's radical otherness, His being beyond human ways? We would still have the anthropomorphic God to whom we relate. But in denying this far side of God, as it were, we sacrifice another aspect of our relationship with God, our standing in awe in the presence of mystery.[8] God's

transcendence is not any more optional than is his closeness. This is not a paradox to be resolved! Each of God's incompatible aspects is absolutely essential to religious life. Giving either of them up, or reducing one to the other, no matter the intellectual attractiveness of resolving paradox, would cripple religious life. So the intellectual puzzle persists, thank God, one might say. But how then might our outlook be seen as a candidate for truth? The reality that is God cannot both have and lack anthropomorphic properties.

Perhaps the concept of truth does not always function in just the way the philosopher's correspondence idea suggests.[9] When we speak of the truth of our vision of God, perhaps we are coming at truth in a different way. We speak, after all, of a "true friend," and "true" there has nothing to do with correspondence; we mean a genuine friend. And it's said that our concept of truth derives originally from expressions like "true saw" and "true North." The root notion may be something like straight ahead, or one-to-be-trusted, or without distortion. ("*Yashar*" in Hebrew works here.) If we give pride of place to that idea, we might see a true thought as one that is to be trusted, one that does not distort. Still, in many contexts the idea of correspondence works well. But for the general case, there is no such simple formula.

This way of approaching truth is perhaps on the road to something satisfactory, but more needs to be said. As Maimonides and friends will be happy to point out, we are still living with paradox. But the situation vis-à-vis truth is even more dire. If Maimonides's theological view were seen as canonical in Jewish tradition, if it were seen as the only legitimate Jewish outlook, then paradox would evaporate. The cost would be the loss of anthropomorphism. I can't myself fathom it, but Maimonides seems fine with it in the *Guide*. However, Maimonides's philosophical view never did become canonical in our tradition. Jewish tradition is rich in diverse religious sensibilities and their attendant theological directions. There is no felt need to have a canonical theology, something that seems to go deep in the tradition's sense of itself.[10] That is not to say that advocates of particular theological ways necessarily see themselves as advancing an optional outlook. I'm certain that Maimonides did not see his own view in that light. But still there are a multiplicity of ways to proceed and in the end, they are all available for purchase, so to speak. It's as if the tradition overrules any claim to exclusivity.

The extent of theological diversity is almost astounding. I've spoken of Maimonides and the contrast with *Hazal*. But there are also the approaches of the Kabbalists, their elaborate theologies. And then there are lots of views that cut across these already mentioned differences, like the contrast between the Hassidim (a number of approaches there) and the Mitnagdim. And the view of

Rabbi S. R. Hirsch, those deriving from the Mussar movement, and the existentialism/phenomenology of Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik, not to mention the various trends in modern Sephardic thought.

Jewish tradition has an intriguing way with unresolvable halakhic differences of opinion. In the face of fierce reasoned opposition about the correct outcome of a legal dispute—where each seeks the truth and may oppose his opponents view as simply wrong—the tradition in its overview of the situation has it that both are "the words of the living God."[11] It's perhaps even more intriguing to contemplate the application of that idea to the philosophic/theological disputes in question. While none of these theological approaches is taken by the larger historical religious community as *the* correct one, each reflects something that itself approaches a vocation, a kind of calling, something to which its adherents pour their energies, *l'shem shamayim,* to come to grips with God and religion. Each represents a distinctive inflection of religious life, each with its own insights. Each is a reflection of the *living* God, in the sense that when one fully *lives* the tradition, one brings to it one's own imagination, emotional life, and distinctive intelligence, this in the context of the contingencies of one's family, one's education, and prior influences.

If I am on the right track here, then the problem about truth reappears in a more general way. The paradox about God's anthropomorphic properties made it difficult to apply the notion of truth, what I called "correspondence truth." But now, even putting aside the paradox, given the multiplicity of legitimate theological orientations, how might truth apply? If each represents "the word of the living God," where can the truth lie?

It's tempting to suppose that what's really true is what they all have in common, basic theological doctrines like the thesis of monotheism. If we were to go in that direction, this would apply as well to the paradox discussed above: While the paradoxical overall outlook cannot be true (in the sense of correspondence truth), it shares with all these theological orientations the basic thesis of monotheism. But here things get even more complicated. First, this approach—what the various views have in common—does not rescue the truth of a full-blooded religious outlook but rather a thin slice of such an outlook, like the idea of monotheism. In this way, it is reminiscent of people who say, "I'm not an adherent of a religion but I do believe in a God."[12] Second, perhaps more significant, do these divergent outlooks really mean or think the same thing when they say that God exists and is unique? For example, Aristotle's God—the Active Intellect, with which Maimonides identifies the God of Jewish tradition—may well not be that of Yehuda HaLevi. And the Lurianic Kabbalists seem to go in quite

another direction.

At this point, I am not sure how to proceed. One might say that even if their conceptions of God differ, it's the same God of whom they speak, the unique God about whom they offer different conceptions. Or in philosophic parlance, their concepts may differ but the intended divine referent is the same. Maybe. But the matter seems less than clear.

My inclination is to think about truth in another key, one suggested above in my discussion of *Hazal*. When we think of our religious outlook as capturing truth, we gesture toward something very large, something toward which we can only gesture: toward how deep the religious vision goes, how it underscores, alerts us, sensitizes us, to features of reality that are as significant as they are elusive; how it can play a key role in constructing a life characterized by genuineness, *yashrut*. This is not truth as correspondence, but a way of thinking about truth that connects it more closely with the way literature and the arts capture truth.

If this is correct, we give up on the claim that our theology is true, that we have the true theory in this domain. But wasn't it always part and parcel of our outlook that God is beyond our ken, that our privilege extends only to seeing his back, as it were? Why then suppose that we can get any closer than one or another of these attempts, *l'shem shamayim,* to bring to bear the best of our thinking and feeling on the subject. Nor can we get beyond the by-now well-rehearsed paradox, thank God.[13]

[1] Still, there may be significant social utility to the theoretically deficient mode of characterizing God. For an illuminating discussion of this and other aspects of Maimonides's views relevant to my discussion, see Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides,* especially Chapters 7 and 8.

[2] No doubt Maimonides prayed, as we try to, with great focus and intensity. How do we integrate Maimonides's philosophic outlook in the *Guide* especially with his life but also with his other writings? This is, as is well-known, immensely challenging.

[3] Cf. Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*: "his faith is like an ear for music or the talent to draw."

[4] I am describing one sort of religious engagement. This is not to say that this is the only legitimate way. One could live a life of piety, highly intentional and focused religious behavior, without invoking a great deal of imagination, as we all do much of the time. People are very different from one another; they love differently; they live differently.

[5] Needless to say, I'm putting this in my own terms; as I remember my *rebbe*'s comment from many years ago.

[6] Vance Ricks, a philosopher at Guilford College, once commented, "How did we ever get from mystery to certainty?"

[7] The details of Maimonides's views in the *Guide* preclude any simple rendition in terms of doctrine. See Halbertal's discussion in *Maimonides.* Too briefly: Maimonides, the philosopher's philosopher, brings philosophical theorizing to bear on the tradition. This would ordinarily suggest that his is a "doctrine approach" to religion. This is also suggested by the well-known Maimonidean Principles of Faith. However, as Halbertal and others have pointed out, Maimonides's philosophical view in the *Guide* appears to be that knowledge of God, Himself (so to speak), is impossible for us; at most we know of His actions, what He has done in the world. What then of the Principles of Faith; their statement would appear to violate Maimonidean strictures on what we can know about God? The answer would appear to be that such principles, despite their theoretical inadequacy, do important practical work in maintaining the social order. Robert Bellah, a Christian thinker and sociologist, says the same of principles of faith generally. See his illuminating *Beyond Belief* (University of California Press, 1970).

[8] I had long seen, with the help of Kadushin's book, that *Hazal* sensed this far side of God. Jeff Helmreich pointed out that it isn't just an important feature of God, but it is also crucial to our relationship with Him. He attributes this insight to the German Pietists (*Chasidei Ashkenaz)*.

[9] In *The Magic Prism: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Oxford University Press, 2004), I argue that there are many contexts in which truth does not function according to such expectations, contexts that have nothing to do with

religion.

[10] Mark Wrathall tells me that something similar is the case with his Mormon faith: there are lots of stories but no official interpretation.

[11] “For three years there was a dispute between Beit [the School of] Hillel and Beit [the School of] Shammai, the former asserting, ‘The law is in agreement with our views,’ and the latter contending, ‘The law is in agreement with our views.’ Then a *bat kol,* a voice from heaven, announced, *Eilu v’eilu divrei Elohim hayyim*, ‘These and those are the words of the Living God,’ adding, ‘but the law is in agreement with the rulings of Beit Hillel’” (Talmid Bavli, *Eruvin* 13b**).**

[12] Not to speak of problems presented by monotheists who come at their god in a very different way, like the arguably monotheistic Pharaoh, Akhenaten, who took the one god to be the sun. Or so it’s said about Akhenaten.

[13] With great thanks to Jeff Helmreich for comments and illuminating discussion. Thanks as well to Rabbi Marc Angel for helpful comments on an earlier draft