Book Review: "In God's Presence: A Theological Reintroduction to Judaism

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Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *In God's Presence: A Theological Reintroduction to Judaism*, Baker Academic Press, Grand Rapids, 2025.

(Reviewed by Rabbi Marc D. Angel)

From its biblical roots to the present day, Judaism is a vast adventure spanning over 3000 years. It encompasses the ideas and ideals of prophets, rabbinic sages, philosophers, mystics and pious folk who lived in different eras, in different lands, under different conditions. How is it possible to write one comprehensive book (or even a series of books) that can capture all the elements that make Judaism distinctive?

Rabbi Dr. Alon Goshen-Gottstein makes a bold attempt to capture the essence of Judaism in his new book. But he is wise enough to acknowledge that "another author, even one with a similar intellectual and spiritual profile, would combine the elements, establish their associations and draw the composite picture in different ways. There is therefore something very personal in attempting a synthetic presentation of Judaism…" (p.4). This book is indeed written from the matrix of his personal studies, experiences, and intellectual preferences. He is an Orthodox rabbi grounded in rabbinic literature, in general philosophy/theology, in Hassidism, and in mystical writings (especially of Rav Kook).

In setting the stage for his presentation, he offers a working definition of Judaism as "the enduring story of Israel's life in God's Presence….God's Presence is the goal, purpose and meaning of its story" (p 47). Throughout the book, he keeps focused on God's Presence in all aspects of Jewish religious life; he stresses the unique covenant between God and Israel; and he offers "modalities" through which to approach Judaism's teachings and observances.

The relational modality centers on the personal relationship between us and God. It is based on our living experience of God, rather than on philosophical speculation. The modality of knowledge speaks to our intellectual drive to know God through our study, thinking and philosophizing. The modality of intensification pushes us to a deeper level of experiencing and knowing God, often through mysticism.

Rabbi Goshen-Gottstein writes that intensification is rarely attained among contemporary Jews. "Judaism's crisis is captured in the fact that, for the greater part of Jewry, the religious life has not advanced beyond the first modality of relationship There is no body of knowledge of God that is taught. There is no science of the day that is correlated to an understanding of God. There is no contemporary philosophical quest even partially reflective of the kind of engagement that earlier generations exhibited" (p. 98). But unless the scope of spiritual life is deepened, Judaism is "exteriorized," rather than internalized.

In his discussion of the central role of Torah study in Judaism, he offers an insight based on his understanding of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. He views God's revelation to Israel "not as the communication of one active party to another passive recipient, but as incorporating both parties in a mutually creative, revelatory process through which Torah is made manifest. Torah is thus what is created in the relational matrix of the two covenantal parties—God and Israel" (p. 185). When we speak of Torah, we not only refer to the Bible but to all the subsequent rabbinic commentaries, interpretations and halakhic rulings. From this perspective, Judaism is an ongoing and expanding story of a covenantal relationship in which humans share in the unfolding of Torah's teachings.

In his discussion about prayer, he points out the positive and negative features of formalized prayer services. He emphasizes the need not merely to present our prayers to the Almighty, but to see prayer as a framework for relating to God's Presence. "This makes prayer, practiced in the fullness of Divine Presence, a special case of the spiritual reality of the covenant" (p. 215).

God's covenant with Israel also entails an expansive nature. "A holy people is a people that has the capacity to sanctify others. Israel's holiness and special status must therefore bear fruit in terms of others. Its election and special holiness place upon it the power, responsibility and mission to extend holiness to others" (p 509). Rabbi Goshen-Gottstein's discussion of the Messiah and messianic era underscore Israel's hope for the redemption of humanity so that all can live peacefully and wisely, in the Presence of One God.

In concluding his book, the author notes: "If Israel loses sight either of its union with God or of how it is united with humanity, then it commits a fundamental error, which is the basis of sin, eclipse of Presence, and ultimately Israel's failure to fulfill its destination. The movement of interiority grounds the unitive knowledge of God in the depths, thereby facilitating the outward quest for unity in humanity (p. 611).

The subtitle of the book is "A Theological Reintroduction to Judaism." The author's goal was to go beyond a simple introduction that presents beliefs and observances. The result is a volume of over 600 pages of heavy reading. This "reintroduction" offers insights and challenges that contribute to the ongoing vitality of Judaism.