

The Search for the Sacred: The Jewish Debate with Modernity

“Tradition”

[TEVYE]

Tradition, tradition! Tradition!

Tradition, tradition! Tradition!

[TEVYE & PAPAS]

Who, day and night, must scramble for a living,

Feed a wife and children, say his daily prayers?

And who has the right, as master of the house,

To have the final word at home?

The Papa, the Papa! Tradition.

The Papa, the Papa! Tradition.

[GOLDE & MAMAS]

Who must know the way to make a proper home,

A quiet home, a kosher home?

Who must raise the family and run the home,

So Papa's free to read the holy books?

The Mama, the Mama! Tradition!

The Mama, the Mama! Tradition!

[SONS]

At three, I started Hebrew school. At ten, I learned a trade.

I hear they've picked a bride for me. I hope she's pretty.

The son, the son! Tradition!

The son, the son! Tradition!

[DAUGHTERS]

And who does Mama teach to mend and tend and fix,
Preparing me to marry whoever Papa picks?

The daughter, the daughter! Tradition!

The daughter, the daughter! Tradition!

“Do You Love Me”

Tevye: Golde, Do you love me?

Golde: Do I what?

T: Do you love me?

G: Do I love you?

With our daughters getting married,
and this trouble in the town,

You're upset, you're worn out, go inside, go lie down.

Maybe it's indigestion.

T: Golde, I'm asking you a question –

Do you love me?

G: You're a fool!

T: I know – But do you love me?

G: Do I love you?

For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes,

Cooked your meals, cleaned your house,

Given you children, milked the cow,

After twenty-five years,

why talk about love right now?

T: Golde, the first time I met you was on our wedding day. I was scared.

G: I was shy.

T: I was nervous.

G: So was I.

T: But my father and my mother said

we'd learn to love each other

And now I'm asking, Golde, do you love me?

G: I'm your wife!

T: I know – But do you love me?

G: Do I love him?

For twenty-five years I've lived with him,

fought with him, starved with him.

Twenty-five years my bed is his,

if that's not love what is?

T: Then you love me?

G: I suppose I do.

T: And I suppose I love you too.

T & G: It doesn't change a thing but even so,

After twenty-five years, it's nice to know.

MARTIN BUBER

In my early years religion was for me the experience of exceptional moments. These were hours of escape from my routine when the firm crust of the everyday was pierced and the world's appearances broke down. "Religious experience" was the experience of an "otherness" which did not fit into the regular course of life. Religion lifted me out. Regular life was about customary task, but religion was about illumination and ecstasy and rapture.

It was an extraordinary event that taught me how wrong this was.

One afternoon, after a morning of "religious experience", I had a visit from an unknown young man. But I wasn't there in spirit. I was certainly friendly. I treated him politely as I did all his friends who were in the habit of seeking me out about this time of day for advice. I conversed attentively and openly with him -- only I failed to guess the questions which he did not put. Not long after I learned from one of his friends -- he himself was no longer alive -- the real content of these questions. I learned that he had come to me not accidentally, but brought by destiny, not for a chat but for a *decision*. He had come *to me*. He had come in this *hour*.

What do we expect when we are in despair and go to someone for help? Surely a *presence* that lets us know that, whatever happens to us, life still has meaning and worth.

Since then I have given up the search for religious experience which is outside normal life: the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. The only mystery in life that is available to us is here where real life happens. Every moment of life is full of claim and responsibility.

Religion belongs to all moments. It is simply living all moments open to the possibility of dialogue.

I-You/I-It:

Our world is of two kinds, according to the two words we can speak.

Our outlook is of two kinds, according to the two words we can speak.

The basic words are not single words but word pairs.

One basic word is the word-pair **I-You**. The other basic word is the word-pair **I-It**. (Which can also be I-He or I-She.) Our self is also of two kinds.

For the I in I-You is different from the I in **I-It**. And there is no I all by itself, but only the I of **I-You** and the I of **I-It**.

We are always one or the other. (I And Thou, pp. 53-4)

Human Relationships When I confront a human being as my You and speak the basic word I-You to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things.

He is no longer a He or She, limited by other He's and She's, a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighborless and seamless, he is You and fills the world. Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in *his* light.

Even as a melody is not composed of tones, nor a verse of words, nor a statue of lines -- one must pull and tear to turn a unity into a multiplicity -- so it is with the human being to whom I say You. I can abstract from him the color of his hair or the color of his graciousness; I have to do this again and again, but immediately he is no longer You.

-- What does one experience of the You? --Nothing at all. For one does not experience it.

--What does one know of the You? --Only everything. For one no longer knows particulars.

Relating to God In every sphere in its own way, through each process of becoming that is present to us, we look out toward the fringe of the Eternal You; in each we are aware of a breath from the Eternal You; in each You we address the Eternal You...The primary word I-You can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me. I become through my relation to the You; as I become I, I say You. All real living is meeting.

JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK

The nature of the dilemma can be stated in a three-word sentence. I am lonely....

In this role, as man of faith, I must experience a sense of loneliness which is of a compound nature. It is a blend of that which is inseparably interwoven into the very texture of the faith gesture, characterizing the unfluctuating metaphysical destiny of a man of faith, and of that which is extraneous to the act of believing and stems from the ever-changing human-historical situation with all its whimsicality.

Let me spell out this passional experience of the contemporary man of faith.

He looks upon himself as a stranger in a modern society, which is technically minded, self-centered, and self-loving, almost in a sickly narcissistic fashion, scorning honor upon honor, piling up victory upon victory, reaching for the distant galaxies, and seeing in the here-and-now sensible world the only manifestation of being. What can a man of faith like myself, living by a doctrine which has not technical potential, by a law which cannot be tested in the laboratory, steadfast in his loyalty to an eschatological vision whose fulfillment cannot be predicted with any degree of probability, let alone certainty, even by the most complex mathematical calculations – what can such a man say to a functional, utilitarian society which is *saeculum*-oriented and whose practical reasons of the mind have long ago supplanted the sensitive reasons of the heart?...

Let me diagnose the situation in a few terse sentences. Contemporary Adam the first, extremely successful in his cosmic-majestic enterprise, refuses to pay earnest heed to the duality in man and tries to deny the undeniable, that another Adam exists beside or, rather, in him. By rejecting Adam the second, contemporary man, *eo ipso*, dismisses the covenantal faith community as something superfluous and obsolete. ... Western man who is affiliated with organized religion and is a generous supporter of its institutions... stands today in danger of losing his dialectical awareness and of abandoning completely the metaphysical polarity implanted in man as a member of both the majestic and the covenantal community. Somehow, man of majesty considers the dialectical awareness too great a burden, interfering with his pursuit of happiness and success, and is, therefore, ready to cast it off.

David Brooks, The Road to Character, 2016, except

Recently I've been thinking about the difference between the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues. The résumé virtues are the ones you list on your résumé, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They're the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being — whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed.

Most of us would say that the eulogy virtues are more important than the résumé virtues, but I confess that for long stretches of my life I've spent more time thinking about the latter than the former. Our education system is certainly oriented around the résumé virtues more than the eulogy ones. Public conversation is, too — the self-help tips in magazines, the nonfiction bestsellers. Most of us have clearer strategies for how to achieve career success than we do for how to develop a profound character.

One book that has helped me think about these two sets of virtues is *Lonely Man of Faith*, which was written by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in 1965. Soloveitchik noted that there are two accounts of creation in Genesis and argued that these represent the two opposing sides of our nature, which he called Adam I and Adam II.

Modernizing Soloveitchik's categories a bit, we could say that Adam I is the career-oriented, ambitious side of our nature. Adam I is the external, résumé Adam. Adam I wants to build, create, produce, and discover things. He wants to have high status and win victories.

Adam II is the internal Adam. Adam II wants to embody certain moral qualities. Adam II wants to have a serene inner character, a quiet but solid sense of right and wrong — not only to do good, but to be good. Adam II wants to love intimately, to sacrifice self in the service of others, to live in obedience to some transcendent truth, to have a cohesive inner soul that honors creation and one's own possibilities.

While Adam I wants to conquer the world, Adam II wants to obey a calling to serve the world. While Adam I is creative and savors his own accomplishments, Adam II sometimes renounces worldly success and status for the sake of some sacred purpose. While Adam I asks how things work, Adam II asks why things exist, and what ultimately we are here for. While Adam I wants to venture forth, Adam II wants to return to his roots and savor the warmth of a family meal. While Adam I's motto is "Success," Adam II experiences life as a moral drama. His motto is "Charity, love, and redemption."

...The hard part of this confrontation, I'd add, is that Adams I and II live by different logics. Adam I — the creating, building, and discovering Adam — lives by a straightforward utilitarian logic. It's the logic of economics. Input leads to output. Effort leads to reward. Practice makes perfect. Pursue self-interest. Maximize your utility. Impress the world. Adam II lives by an inverse logic. It's a moral logic, not an economic one. You have to give to receive. You have to surrender to something outside yourself to gain strength within yourself. You have to conquer your desire to get what you crave. Success leads to the greatest failure, which is pride. Failure leads to the greatest success, which is humility and learning. In order to fulfill yourself, you have to forget yourself. In order to find yourself, you have to lose yourself.

To nurture your Adam I career, it makes sense to cultivate your strengths. To nurture your Adam II moral core, it is necessary to confront your weaknesses.

...We live in a culture that nurtures Adam I, the external Adam, and neglects Adam II. We live in a society that encourages us to think about how to have a great career but leaves many of us inarticulate about how to cultivate the inner life. ...

ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

Recovering the Questions It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion — its message become meaningless. *Religion is an answer to man's ultimate questions.* The moment we become oblivious to ultimate questions, religion becomes irrelevant, and its crisis sets in. The primary task of philosophy of religion is to rediscover the questions to which religion is an answer. (God in Search of Man)

Depth Theology Where is religion to be found? What sort of entity is it? What is its mode of being?

He who is in search of art will find it in works of art as preserved, for example, in art collections. He who is in search of literature will find it in books as preserved in libraries. But where is the place of religion? Do visible symbols as preserved in temples, doctrines and dogmas as contained in books, contain the totality of religion?

Religion has been reduced to institution, symbol, theology. It does not affect the pretheological situation, the presymbolic depth of existence. To redirect the trend, we must lay bare what is involved in religious existence; we must recover the situations which both precede and correspond to the theological formulations; we must recall the questions which religious doctrines are trying to answer, *the antecedents of religious commitment*, the presuppositions of faith.

To some the truth of religion is in its ritual, to others the essence of religion is in its dogma. There is another component, however, which may be regarded as the vital ingredient, and yet because of its imponderable nature it often escapes the eye of the observer. It is that which goes on within the person: the innerness of religion. Vague and often indescribable, it is the heart of religious existence. Ritual and myth, dogma and deed remain externals unless there is a response from within the person, a moment of identification and penetration to make them internals. ("Depth Theology" The Insecurity of Freedom)

Wonder Wonder, or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious man's attitude toward history and nature. One attitude is alien to his spirit: taking things for granted, regarding events as a natural course of things. To find an approximate cause of a phenomenon is no answer to his ultimate wonder. He knows that there are laws that regulate the course of natural processes; he is aware of the regularity and pattern of things. However, such knowledge fails to mitigate his sense of perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all. Looking at the world he would say, "This is the Lord's doing, it is marvelous in our eyes." (Psalms 118:23)

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understand that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.

Awareness of the divine begins with wonder. It is the result of what man does with his higher incomprehension. The greatest hindrance to such awareness is our adjustment to conventional notions, to mental cliches. Wonder or

radical amazement, the state of maladjustment to words and notions, is therefore a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is.

Radical amazement has a wider scope than any other act of man...What fills us with radical amazement is not the relations in which everything is embedded but the fact that even the minimum of perception is a maximum of enigma. The most incomprehensible fact is the fact that we comprehend at all. The way to faith leads through acts of wonder and radical amazement.

This is an insight we gain in acts of wonder: not to measure meaning in terms of our own mind, but to sense a meaning infinitely greater than ourselves. (God in Search of Man)

The Question The sense of wonder, awe, and mystery does not give us a knowledge of God. It only leads to a place where the question of God becomes an inescapable concern, to a situation in which we discover that we can neither place our anxiety in a safe deposit of opinions nor delegate to others the urgent task of answering ultimate questions.

Religion begins with a consciousness that something is asked of us. It is in that tense, eternal asking in which the soul is caught and in which man's answer is elicited.

The ultimate question, bursting forth in our souls, is too startling, too heavily laden with unutterable wonder to be an academic question, to be equally suspended between yes and no. We can no longer ask: Is there a God? In humility and contrition we realize the presumption of such asking. The more we meditate, the more clearly we realize that the question we ask is a question we are being asked; that *man's question about God is God's question about man*.

All of human history as described by the Bible may be summarized in one phrase: *God is in search of man*. Faith in God is a response to God's question. (God in Search of Man)

The Sabbath Technical civilization is man's conquest of space. It is a triumph frequently achieved by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, namely, time. In technical civilization, we expend time to gain space. To enhance our power in the world of space is our main objective. Yet to have more does not mean to be more. The power we attain in the world of space terminates abruptly at the borderline of time. But time is the heart of existence....To gain control of the world of space is certainly one of our tasks. The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern.

...Judaism is a *religion of time* aiming at *the sanctification of time*. Unlike the space-minded man to whom time is unvaried, iterative, homogeneous, to whom all hours are alike, qualityless, empty shells, the Bible senses the diversified character of time. There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious. Judaism teaches us to be attached to *holiness in time*, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals; and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn; ..the Day of Atonement. Jewish ritual may be characterized as the art of significant forms in time, as *architecture of time*.