

THEOLOGY ISN'T often considered one of the central themes modern Jews discuss. But we are beginning to see an outpouring of interest and creative, original theological thinking in all spheres of Judaism — ranging from Orthodoxy to Reform. We highlight in this issue some new, fertile Jewish writing about God, writing that seeks to illuminate areas as diverse as the environment, feminism, religious perspectives on homosexuality, pluralism, and interfaith relations. How thinking about God stretches our sense about these and other critical expressions of our lives is the question that links these otherwise wide-ranging, engaging essays.

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Who Needs Theology?

Neil Gillman

A RECENT ENCOUNTER with a rabbinical student forced me to confront a reality that I had long tried to avoid. We were discussing God: How do we know about God? What can we say about God? and the rest, when the student's hand shot up. "Why are we discussing all of this? What we need from you is some practical help on how to get Jews to have a kosher home or keep Shabbat. Theology is irrelevant."

A personal note: My mature engagement with Judaism came on the wings of theology. I had been a philosophy major at McGill University and comfortable on the periphery of Jewish life when I wandered into a Hillel lecture by Will Herberg. This was the first hint I ever had that Judaism was intellectually stimulating. Maimonides knew Plato and Aristotle! Kaplan had read Dewey! Franz Rosenzweig was a Jewish existentialist! There was a field called Jewish philosophy? That encounter led me to rabbinical school, where I soon realized that my fascination with theological issues was not shared by most of the seminary teachers. I went on for a doctorate in philosophy at Columbia University (the Jewish Theological Seminary did not have a PhD program in those days) and then a career teaching and writing Jewish philosophy and theology.

Early on in my rabbinic studies, a talmudic *sugya* prompted me to comment on the rabbinic concept of God. The instructor, a prominent talmudist, responded, "Mr. Gillman, God yes, God no. What's important in this text is whether or not you put on *tefillin* this morning." (The *sugya* had something to do with *tefillin*.) The response that came to my mind (though not to my lips) was, "Without God, I wouldn't even begin to consider putting on *tefillin*." For me at least, theology — what I more colloquially came to call "doing the head work," — was simply indispensable to my Jewish religious identity. And, as I began to write and teach, my primary goal has been to convince my students and readers that it should be indispensable to them as well.

Bringing theology — and especially revelation — to the core of Jewish identity and identification has proven increasingly frustrating. And yet, how we address revelation determines our views on authority in matters of belief and practice, and how we address authority determines where we locate ourselves in the contemporary Jewish community.

As a Conservative Jew, the issue of revelation is particularly complex. I can neither accept as literally true the claim that God once spoke to our ancestors, nor can I dismiss Sinai as pure fiction. I need to articulate a theology of revelation that permits me to claim that God did reveal the Torah to the Jewish people. But it should also enable me to pursue higher biblical criticism, question the historicity of the pentateuchal narratives, and apply a critical, wide-ranging historicism to the study of Judaism. I support the decisions of the Conservative movement's Committee on Law and Standards that, *inter alia*, permits the marriage of a *kohen* and a divorcee (though that practice is explicitly prohibited in the Torah) and is

The "uncensored rants of Yossi Abramowitz," publisher of *Sh'ma*,
on his blog: www.peoplehood.org.