

cast down from above, nor as capricious projections thrown on high from below. Revelation involves an ongoing process of listening and interpreting, receiving and giving, accepting and transforming. I accept revelation "like wheat from which to derive fine flour, or like flax from which to make a garment" (Seder Eliyahu Zuta, Chapter 2).

Which in revelation is divine and which is human? I do not accept the hard disjunctives insinuated in the question. I find it impossible and unnecessary to separate the two. To adapt a metaphor by William James: Does the river make the banks or do the banks make the river?

## The Diaspora

I believe that *ahavat yisrael* (love of Israel) is the correlative and consequence of *ahavat ha-shem* (love of God) and *ahavat torah* (love of Torah). The three-fold cords of love must not be torn.

Love of Israel evokes the metaphor of marriage between Israel and the Diaspora. The sanctity of that union is not lodged in the "I" or the "thou" but in the "betweenness" of discovery. Like marriage, that relationship vows fidelity to each other and to the transcendent vision of making whole the shattered vessels of the world.

A healthy union disavows the absorption of the other. The negators of the diaspora who find nothing but fault in the other, and the denigrators of Israel who ignore its democratic sovereignty, prepare the ground for a tragic separation. For either to run to a third party to impose its will on the other, is to destroy the confidence and confidentiality of the relationship. There are limits to dissent and love knows its borders.

## Death and the End of Days

I believe in the wisdom of our tradition that operates with a far-reaching reality principle particularly evident in the understanding of death and the afterlife. There is no denial of the sting of death. The late Orthodox philosopher and Talmudist, J. B. Soloveitchik, characterizes the tradition as abhorring death: "A corpse defiles; a grave defiles; a person who has been defiled by a corpse is defiled for seven days and is forbidden to eat any sacred offerings or enter the temple." His halakhic sentiments are rooted in the strong life-affirmation of Judaism.

The Jewish reality principle extends to the status of the deceased. Revered in memory, the deceased have no duties to perform, no imperative to follow, no deeds for which they may be praised or blamed. With stark candor the psalmist declares, "The dead praise not the Lord, neither any that go down in silence." The Jewish reality principle places a limit on mourning. Maimonides warns

against excess mourning. "He who frets over the way of the world is foolish."

I do not understand the afterlife literally or vertically. *Gan Eden* (Paradise) or *Gehinnom* (hell) for me do not refer to another place, another world, another time. The mourner's kaddish refers to none of these. It speaks of the mobilization of human energies to sanctify God's name here and now in our own time.

Despite the rich rabbinic literature and the daily prayers that speak of calling the dead to eternal life and refer to a celestial Garden of Eden, in practice that afterlife does not appear to function as a major Jewish belief. Eulogies for the individual or consolations for the martyred victims of the Holocaust rarely if ever call upon the resurrection of the dead or the disposition of the soul in heaven as explanation or comfort. The yearning for another world I understand as a protest against the wretched status of the status quo. I believe in the immortality of influence that testifies to the ideals of the deceased and calls upon the living to keep faith with the noblest aspirations of those who sleep in the dust.

HAROLD SCHULWEIS is rabbi of Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California and a *Sh'ma* Senior Editor.

## I believe...

Elen M. Umansky

I believe that all religious belief is grounded in personal and communal experience, formed within and continually shaped by the context of our lives. Biblical and rabbinic teachings remain a valuable record of our ancestors' experiences of God and God's revelation, yet for me, at least, they do not exempt subsequent generations (including our own) from the obligation to become spiritual seekers. The rabbinic understanding of why God self-identifies as "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" underscores this conviction--although there is one God, each of us experiences God differently. God, in other words, can only be known through the lens of our own experience.

Thus, I believe, I can make no universal claims about either the nature or character of God, for religious knowledge is necessarily limited. I write this reflection, then, feeling somewhat uncomfortable about saying "I believe..." for such a statement seems to imply a sense of personal conviction that I do not always possess. Indeed, at times, my religious doubts are as strong as my beliefs. I do not doubt God's existence nor do I doubt that God is both immanent and transcendent, yet I'm often unsure as to what immanence and transcendence really mean. While my experience of God as covenantal partner is an

experience of God as a being (as opposed to a process) capable of entering into a personal relationship with humanity, my experience of God as creator and sustainer alternates between an experience of God as a life-giving force within the world and within each of us and a powerful, awe-inspiring being in and above the world who creates and sustains life out of a love and/or need for humanity. I experience God as loving, merciful, and just, yet I believe that this experience, clearly shaped and articulated by and through Jewish teachings, often—but not always—leads me to shut out the voice inside of me that asks whether there is also a dark, perhaps evil side to God, that I am afraid or unwilling to explore.

### **The Nature and Content of Our Covenant**

I believe that the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people is an eternal one of mutual responsibility and obligation. At the same time, however, I believe that much of its specific content has changed, and will continue to change, in response to both the changing context of our lives and our personal and communal understanding of divine revelation. Without denying the significance of biblical and rabbinic teachings, either to Jews of the past or to us in the present, I firmly believe that membership in God's covenant with Israel obligates us to work to ensure, in whatever ways we can, that the covenant remain a living covenant, offering Jews of present and future generations, a sense of both community and meaning.

### **The Locus of Authority Beyond Self**

I believe that religious authority extends beyond the self, yet is not completely separate from the self. For me, at least, authority is rooted in both personal and communal experience as well as in sacred texts. Believing that no self is fully autonomous, that we always exist in relationship to others and to the world in which we live, I recognize that my understanding of that which is authoritative has been influenced, and continues to be influenced, not only by personal factors (including gender) but also by the social, political, and cultural context in which I live. It is further influenced by my religious community—the liberal and progressive Jewish community—with which I have identified my entire life and which clearly has helped shape and give expression to my own religious language, and by these written texts which for several thousand years have helped define and preserve Judaism as a living religious tradition.

### **Death and the End of Days**

I believe that the diaspora has an important role to play in the ongoing life of the Jewish people. As a Reform Jew, I grew up associating the dispersion of world Jewry with the mission assigned to the Jewish people by God following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C. E. This mission, I learned, was to bear witness to God's reality and to spread God's moral teachings throughout the world. Certainly, the language of "religious mission" comes less naturally to me than it did to the 19th and early 20th century proponents of Reform Judaism. Yet, from them I learned, and still believe that Jewish life in the diaspora need not be a life of exile.

Believing in the ongoing centrality of both the land of Israel and the state of Israel to Judaism and the Jewish people, I also believe that the role of the diaspora is to affirm and underscore the later Pharisaic conviction that Jewish life can be lived anywhere. I'm not sure whether I believe that the dispersion of world Jewry reflects God's will, but I do believe that Jewish religious and cultural life can flourish in the diaspora (as, for example, Jewish scholarship has flourished and continues to flourish in the United States) and that Jewish communities, both in the diaspora and in Israel, have a great deal to learn from one another. Finally, I believe that the goal of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, requires monumental effort and that diaspora existence, for all of its shortcomings, has helped broaden our vision while providing new resources and opportunities for us to work with others in making the world whole.

I believe that no amount of either wishful thinking or philosophical speculation can enable us to know whether life continues after death or if, and when, there will be a messianic "end of days". Thinking about death, however, as the cessation of all life (and more specifically, thinking about my ceasing to exist and being permanently separated from my children, husband and parents) overwhelms me with such anxiety and sadness, that I derive small comfort in imagining either an eschatological end of days or an immortality gained through one's work and/or the memories of others. I hope our souls, at least, *are* immortal. Yet recognizing that aging inevitably leads to decay and death, I have come to accept, though I confess not, or at least not yet, to celebrate human finitude.

ELLEN M. UMANSKY, co-editor of *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality: A Sourcebook* (Beacon, 1992) and a CLAL teaching associate, is a *Sh'ma* Contributing Editor.

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