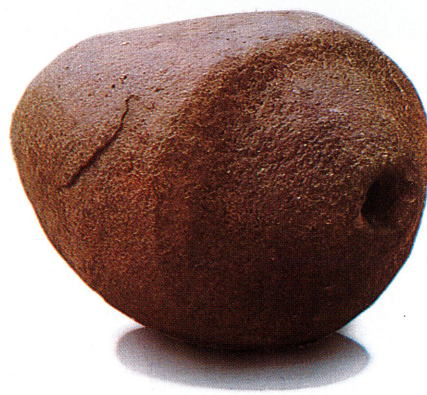




CHAPTER VII

J U D A I S M

*Hear O Israel,
the Lord our God,
the Lord is One.*



*Above: The so-called "Stone of Moses" or Ka-Ka-Bal, on which
Moses is said to have demonstrated his magical skills. Left: A
covering for the Torah, 18th century.*



IT HAS BEEN ESTIMATED that one-third of Western civilization bears the marks of its Jewish ancestry. We feel its force in the names we give to our children (Abraham Lincoln), in our art (Michaelangelo's "David"), and our national life in sayings that feed our souls. ("Proclaim liberty throughout the land" as inscribed on the Liberty Bell). The real impact of the ancient Jews, however, lies in the extent to which Western civilization took over their perspective on the deepest questions life poses.

When, mindful of this impact, we go back to the land, the people, and the history that made this impact, we are in for a surprise. We might expect these to be as impressive as their influence, but they are not. Chronologically, the Hebrews were latecomers on the stage of history. When they finally settled down, the land they chose was equally unimpressive. One hundred and

fifty miles in length, about fifty miles in breadth, Canaan was a postage stamp of a country, about one-eighth the size of Illinois. Even Jewish history, when viewed from without, amounts to little. It is not dull, but by external standards it is very much like the histories of countless other little peoples. Compared with the histories of the great powers of the time, Jewish history is strictly minor league.

If the key to the achievement of the Jews lies neither in their antiquity nor in the proportions of their land and history, where does it lie? The lead that we shall follow is this: What lifted the Jews from obscurity to greatness was their passion for meaning.

Silver scroll containing the Book of Esther, from the Hebrew Museum in Prague.



MEANING IN GOD

IN THE BEGINNING GOD....” From beginning to end, the Jewish quest for meaning was rooted in their understanding of the Supreme Being. Whatever a people’s philosophy, it must take account of the Other. There are two reasons for this. First, no human being is self-created, from which it follows that humankind has issued from something other than itself. Second, everyone at some point finds his or her power limited. Add therefore to the Other as that from which one has issued, a second meaning. At certain points it exceeds our control.

Faced with this ineluctable Other, people wonder if it is meaningful. Four characteristics could keep it from being so; if it were prosaic, chaotic, amoral, or hostile. The glory of the Hebrew search for meaning lies in its refusal to give in to any of these alternatives.

The Jews resisted the prosaic by personifying the Other. In this they were at one with their ancient contemporaries. The concept of the world as comprised mainly of lifeless matter is a late invention. The early world was alive and sentient, through and through.

Underlying the poetry of biblical descriptions of God lay the claim that ultimately Reality – the Other – is more like a person than like a thing. Of this claim two things are to be said. First, evidence against it is so lacking that as knowledgeable a philosopher-scientist as Alfred North Whitehead could embrace it in the twentieth century. Second, the claim is nobler than its alternative. The Jews were reaching out for the most exalted concept of the Other that they could conceive, and people had more depth and mystery than other analogical starting points.

Where the Hebrews differed from their neighbors was in focusing the personal traits of the Other in a single, nature-transcending will. For other Mediterranean peoples, each major power of nature was a distinct deity; whereas in the Bible, nature in its entirety was created by, and under the sovereignty of the Lord of all being.

Other gods are mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures, but – being both derivative from Yahweh (wrongly rendered as Jehovah in early English translations) and mortal, they are not on his plane.

The significance of the monotheism the Jews arrived at precociously lies in the focus it affords life. If God is that to which one gives oneself completely, to have more than one God is to live a divided life. A consistent way that leads to human fulfillment calls for constancy – singleness – in the Other that supports it. That this singleness existed was the bedrock of Hebrew belief. “*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One*” (Deut 6:4).

There remains the question of whether the Other, now seen as personal and one, was either amoral or hostile. If it were either, meaning would again be compromised, for if this is not a moral universe, goodness cannot in the long run prevail. The odds against it are insuperable.

We come here to the supreme achievement of Jewish theology, which lay not in its monotheism but the character it ascribed to its single God. Two traits characterized the gods of the Jews’ contemporaries. First, they tended to be amoral. Second, they had no concern for human beings. The Jews reversed both these points. While the gods of Olympus pursued beautiful women, the God of Sinai watched over widows and orphans. While Mesopotamia’s Anu and Canaan’s El remained aloof, Yahweh spoke the name of Abraham and lifted his people from anonymity.

Such, then, was the Hebrews’ conception of the Other that confronts human beings. It was not prosaic, for at its center was a Being of awesome majesty. It was not chaotic, for it coalesced in a divine unity. It was neither amoral nor indifferent, for its goodness was “*from everlasting to everlasting*.” There were solid grounds for the Jews’ exultation as they exclaimed rhetorically, “*Who is like you among the gods, O Yahweh?*” “*What great nation has a God like the Lord?*”



MEANING IN CREATION

IN "THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV" Dostoyevsky has Ivan blurt out: "I don't accept this world of God's, and although I know it exists, I don't accept it at all. It's not that I don't accept God, you must understand, it's the world created by Him I don't and cannot accept."

Ivan is not alone in finding God, perhaps, good, but the world not; entire philosophies have done the same. The Jews, on the other hand, affirmed the world. The account of creation in the opening chapter of Genesis concludes with Yahweh surveying his handiwork and finding it "very good."

That judgment, which the scribe put in the mouth of Yahweh, may be the most important one the human spirit can register. Everyone at times finds him- or herself asking whether life is worthwhile, which amounts to asking whether, when the going gets rough, it makes sense to continue to live.

There is a passage in T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* that addresses this point. Celia, who has been not just disappointed but disillusioned in love, goes to a psychiatrist for help and begins her first session with this unusual statement:

*"I must tell you
that I should really like to think there's something wrong with
me*

*Because, if there isn't, then there's something wrong
with the world itself – and that's much more frightening!*

That would be terrible.

*So I'd rather believe
there is something wrong with me, that could be put right."*

An illuminated Old Testament manuscript in Hebrew.



יהודה

THE ILLUSTRATED WORLD'S RELIGIONS

Celia puts the point in a nutshell. When things grow difficult, what are we to conclude? That the fault is in the stars, dear Brutus, or that it lies closer at hand, in ourselves? Neither answer can be objectively verified, but there is no doubt as to which elicits the more creative response. In the one case we can do something about problems; in the other we are helpless pawns. Seen in this light, the Jewish affirmation of the world's goodness equipped them with a constructive starting point. However desperate their lot, however deep the valley of the shadow of death, they never despaired of life itself. Meaning was always waiting to be won. The opportunity to respond creatively was never absent.

Thus far we have been speaking of the Jewish estimate of creation as a whole, but one element in the Biblical account deserves special attention: its regard for the physical, material component of existence.

Much of Greek thought takes a dim view of matter. Likewise Indian philosophy, which considers matter a barbarian, spoiling everything it touches. Salvation in such contexts involves freeing the soul from its material container. The Hebrew Bible presents things differently. Opening with the words, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," it closes its first chapter with God reviewing "everything that he had made," earth included, "and behold, it was very good." The emphasis, "very," gives

a lilt to the entire Jewish, and subsequently Western, view of the natural world. Pressing for meaning in every direction, the Jews refused to abandon the physical aspects of existence as illusory, defective, or unimportant. The abundance of food made the Promised Land "a

good land." Sex also was good. An occasional splinter group (such as the Essenes) might disagree, but Jews as a whole hold marriage in high esteem. The prophets' denunciation of the inequalities of wealth was premised on the conviction that possessions are good – so good that no one should be without them. Even in death the Jews would not renounce the body; hence their belief (which Christians and Muslims would continue) in bodily resurrection.

Unlike India, East Asia prizes nature; but to be appreciated and conformed to, not (as the Jews were to add) worked with. When, after registering earth's goodness, Yahweh goes on to commission his children to "have dominion" over it (Gen. 1:26), a new note was struck. The combined thesis that nature is good and a field for importantly constructive endeavor, was novel for its

day. It was a combination that (as we know) was destined to bear fruit, for it is no accident that modern science first emerged in the Western world.

The Jewish view of the material world as "very good" was a radical departure from the ancient Greek and Indian philosophies.



MEANING IN HUMAN EXISTENCE

THE MOST CRUCIAL ELEMENT in a people's outlook is their self-image, and here too the Jews looked for meaning. The anthropological question interested them deeply, but not for theoretical reasons. They wanted to understand human nature so they would not miss its highest registers.

That the human self is limited they knew intimately. Compared with the majesty of the heavens, people are "dust." The powers of nature can crush them "like moths." Their earthly span is brief "as grass," and troubled "like a sigh" (Ps 8:4). There were times when the Jews wondered why God should give people a second thought.

The remarkable feature of their anthropology, though, was that without losing sight of human weakness they saw concomitantly its unspeakable grandeur. The word "unspeakable" is exact here, for the translators of the King James Version of the Bible refused to follow the Psalmist who positioned human beings only "a little lower than God" (Ps 8:5). That claim struck the translators as presumptuous, so they toned it down to read "a little lower than the angels." The one charge that has never been leveled against the Bible is that its characters are not completely human. Even its greatest heroes like David are presented in so unvarnished a fashion that the Book of Samuel has been called the most honest historical writing of the ancient world. Yet no amount of realism could dampen Jewish aspiration. The same creatures who on occasion deserve the epithets "maggot and worm" (Job 25:6) are also the beings whom God has "crowned with glory and honor" (Ps 8:6).

On the realistic side of this ledger we have cited physical weakness, but moral weakness weighed heavier

for the Jews. "I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me" (Ps 51:5). It is altogether wrong to conclude from this verse that the Jews thought that human nature is depraved and that sex is evil. The verse does, however, contribute something of importance to Jewish anthropology. The word sin comes from a root meaning "to miss the mark," and this people repeatedly do. Their missteps, though, are not fore-ordained, for the Jews never questioned human freedom. People forge their destinies through freely chosen decisions. "I have set before you life and death. Therefore choose life" (Deut 30:19).

Finally, it followed from the Jewish concept of their God as a loving God that people are God's beloved children. In one of the tenderest metaphors of the entire Bible, Hosea pictures God yearning over people as though they were toddling infants:

*It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
I led them with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.*

(Hos 11:3)

What are the ingredients of the most creatively meaningful image of human existence that the mind can conceive? Remove human frailty, and the estimate lacks realism. Remove grandeur, and aspiration recedes. Remove sin, and sentimentality threatens. Remove freedom, and responsibility goes by the board. Remove, finally, divine love, and life becomes estranged. With all that has been discovered about human life in the intervening 2500 years, it is difficult to fault the Jewish assessment.