

# SPIRITUALITY AND SCRIPTURE: A JEWISH VIEW

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**T**HE PROBLEM OF DESCRIBING THE RELATIONSHIP between Jewish spirituality and scripture lies in part in defining both terms. If it is a difficult enough problem within Christianity to define 'spirituality', what does it mean when translated into Jewish terms? And how does one identify it? For in Judaism 'spirituality', as an expression of subsuming one's will to God, seeking the nearness of God in one's life, is traditionally expressed through the symbolic language of '*mitzvot*', 'commandments'. Essentially it is about a life regulated, conducted and defined within a particular framework of practices, rituals and actions. But this life, though seemingly determined by outer matters, has its own rich inwardness, and this is expressed, again outwardly, through the recital of appropriate blessings which turn one's thoughts constantly to God. These relate, in general terms, either to the recognition that whatever comes one's way is ultimately a gift of God and needs to be acknowledged as such, or they are those that are recited before fulfilling a religious duty. This life experienced as 'blessing'—up to one hundred are traditionally to be recited daily—includes those recited at the moment of awakening, through those that are found in the prayers recited three times a day, through those accompanying the eating of food or any special event or activity, to those recited last thing at night.

But how does one define such a way of life? Is it an existence under the 'burden of the Law', hemmed in by restrictions and formalities? Or is it a life utterly dedicated to the will of God whereby the routines and habits and rituals of daily existence are transmuted into divine service, releasing spiritual energy to permeate the whole of one's life?

These are not rhetorical questions but real challenges posed to Judaism, internally and from outside. Such a traditional style of Jewish life exists for many still today, both within the closed, seemingly self-contained universe of certain Jewish quarters in large cities and in the more open communities of Orthodox Jews through-

out the Western world. But this '*mitzvah*-orientated' world accounts for only a part of religiously committed Jewry, with a greater number seeking their identity within a whole range of non-Orthodox movements, variously described as Reform or Liberal or Conservative. Here the centrality of the '*mitzvah*', or at least the terminology of '*mitzvah*', is not so clear-cut. For these movements that have emerged from the European Enlightenment are struggling to understand where a 'commandment' is to be located in their lives when the authority of the tradition itself is in question, and even the nature of divine revelation. Were it not for a shared sense of Jewish peoplehood that holds it all together these various groupings would be separated in a far more radical way. Moreover precisely because of these ambiguities, any attempt to evaluate a contemporary Jewish spirituality should also address the wide range of intellectual and religious searching done by apparently secular Jews who feel out of place within the world of formal Jewish religiosity, yet seem to be often at the forefront of Western exploration of things ranging from Eastern spirituality to new cults to the growing worlds of post-Freudian psychologies and derived, 'alternative' lifestyles.<sup>1</sup> For completeness one should also note the number of Jews who have found a spiritual home in Christianity, often precisely because of a perceived lack of individual spiritual exploration within many parts of the Jewish world, particularly where 'behaviour' appears to be emphasized rather than meaning, action rather than meditation, and collectivity or group loyalty rather than personal fulfilment.

Needless to say, somewhere or other, everything is available within Judaism, as within any major religion, but it may not always be accessible or even findable. Living as a minority group within a largely Western Christian (or post-Christian) world, the primary models of what 'spirituality' might mean tend to be Christian, and in general the religious climate tends to be defined *for* Jews by others rather than *by* Jews for themselves. (One has only to note the different attitudes of Jews towards their own tradition within Catholic or Protestant societies to see how far the environment shapes Jewish religious 'culture'.) Thus a religion based on *mitzvot*, religious obligations clearly defined in terms of practice, is perceived, and hence may come to perceive itself, as anachronistic in a Christian world, for a variety of theological, historical and political reasons. Conversely, 'spirituality' within a legal religious system is normative in the Islamic world, so that, but for contemporary political problems, Judaism has existed, and even flourished, in a quite different

way under Islam. The emergence of the State of Israel will inevitably change many patterns of Jewish life, but after little more than forty turbulent years the process has hardly even begun. If any trends can be seen they may well reflect the greater long-term influence of an Islamic environment.<sup>2</sup>

All of which is a necessary preamble to considering the role of scripture in Jewish spirituality. But 'scripture' also needs to be defined rather carefully. In its most common meaning in this context it refers to the Hebrew Bible, but in terms of the 'religious books' that have a major influence in shaping Jewish spirituality, there are others that have also to be considered.

One of the daily blessings in the morning service concerns the commandment to study, on the assumption that a Jew will study Torah, the teaching of God, at some point during the day. The existence of such a blessing puts study very precisely at the heart of Jewish spirituality, indeed as itself a command from God. In a way this reflects the endless openness and adventure of Jewish spirituality within the formal superstructure of the 'Law'.

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, whose commandments make us holy and who commands us to engage in the study of Torah.

The blessing itself is too formulaic to convey anything more than the duty to study. The one that is recited after studying is far more revealing, both of the joy inherent in study itself and its centrality in Jewish spirituality.

Eternal our God, make the words of Your Torah sweet in our mouths and in the mouths of Your people, the family of Israel. May we and our children, and all the children of Your people Israel, know Your name and Your Torah for its own sake. Blessed are You Eternal, who teaches Torah to Your people Israel.

However it is important to note from the outset what is meant here by 'Torah'. The word, commonly translated in the past as 'Law', comes from a root meaning to 'shoot at a target', and carries the derived sense of pointing in a particular direction, indicating a way and hence to 'teach', in the widest sense of the word. A good example of the verb used in this way is to be found in Isaiah 2,3 (cf Micah 4,2), 'He shall *teach* us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths'. It is the term used by the tradition, in the first instance, for the Pentateuch, the '*torah shebikhtav*', the 'written Torah', given to Moses at Mt Sinai,

and by extension the rest of the Hebrew Bible. But alongside the Pentateuch, Moses was also given at Sinai a 'commentary' to it, the '*torah sheb'al peh*', the 'oral Torah', which provided a bridge between the written text and the actual practices of the developing Jewish world. This is viewed traditionally as a seamless chain of tradition from Moses through to the Pharisaic and Rabbinic leadership, though it may be argued that the need to stress such continuity itself hints at the revolutionary changes that had taken place in re-defining Judaism.

Moses received Torah on Sinai, and handed it on to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets handed it on to the men of the Great Assembly. (*Sayings of the fathers* 1,1)

These two aspects, written and oral, come to be understood collectively as Torah, and hence all subsequent developments derived 'directly' from them are extensions of Torah until it comes to stand for the Jewish religious 'way' in both senses of the English word, the direction to follow and the means whereby this is achieved. It is thus in its narrower sense 'law', and outer 'path', but in its wider one 'lore', the ethical values and belief system that accompany the 'inner' journey.

In a more formal way, the 'oral Torah' is located in a variety of other Jewish 'scriptures', beginning with the 'Mishnah', the earliest extra-biblical codification of the Jewish oral law (dating in its written form from about the second century of the Common Era, CE), the 'Talmud', an extensive 'commentary' to the Mishnah, in two versions (Babylonian and Palestinian), completed about the sixth century CE. Whereas at first glance the Babylonian Talmud appears to be a kind of 'Hansard', recording the great Rabbinic discussions about the application of the law to contemporary situations, it is actually a finely and subtly crafted literary creation, the study of which is an enormously demanding and exciting intellectual exercise. It is the Talmud, *par excellence*, that is the 'Torah' that Jews have generally studied, together with a variety of later commentaries to it and codifications of Jewish law derived from it, as well as the subsequent rulings (*Responsa*) by later Rabbinic authorities on particular issues. However, in parallel with this 'legal' line of development, the non-legal material (*haggadah*) was similarly explored in a variety of collections of Rabbinic exegesis of the Hebrew Bible, the 'Midrash'. Its richness and variety cannot be elaborated here, but its significance is nicely expressed in its own self-evaluation.

If you wish to know the One who spoke and the world came into being, learn *haggadah*; for from it you will learn to know God and cleave to His ways. (*Sifre Deuteronomy*, *Ekeb* 49)

At different periods the Hebrew Bible itself has been more or less central within Jewish study, with guidance from the great mediaeval Jewish commentators like Rashi (France 1040–1105), Abraham Ibn Ezra (Spain 1093–1167), Nahmanides (Spain 1194–1270)—each in his different way introducing new elements to the interpretative process, in dynamic relationship with his contemporary world.<sup>3</sup>

Thus on formal grounds we could argue that Jewish ‘spirituality’ is expressed through the ‘actions’ of the ‘*mitzvoṭ*’ and the practice of a committed study of the texts of Jewish tradition. But the two interact, as the following selections from Rabbinic teachings indicate.

These are the things whose interest people enjoy in this world, while the capital remains for them in the world to come: respecting one’s father and mother; acts of generosity and love; coming early to the Synagogue for morning and evening study; giving hospitality to strangers; visiting the sick; dowering the bride; attending the dead; devotion in prayer; making peace between a person and their neighbour—and the study of Torah is equivalent to (or leads to) them all. (*Mishnah Peah* 1,1)

Rabbi Chananya ben Teradion says: ‘When two people sit together and words of Torah pass between them, the presence of God rests between them also’. (*Sayings of the fathers* 3,2)

Rabbi Ishmael says: ‘He who learns in order to teach will be given the opportunity to learn and to teach. But he who learns in order to practise will be given the opportunity both to learn and teach, and to observe and practise.’ (*Sayings of the fathers* 4,6)

Ben Bag Bag says: ‘Turn the Torah this way and turn it that way, for everything is in it. Look into it, grow old and grey over it, and do not turn away from it for you have nothing better than this.’ (*Sayings of the fathers* 5,25)

Shammai says: ‘Make Torah study a fixed habit. Say little and do much, and welcome everyone cheerfully.’ (*Sayings of the fathers* 1,15)

But to confine ‘Scripture’ to study alone is also to do a disservice to the richness of Jewish ‘spirituality’, because of the multiple context in which the Hebrew Bible appears within the liturgical and prayer life of the Jew. Thus the entire Pentateuch is read in the course of a one- or three-year cycle on Shabbat (Saturday) mornings (with extracts read also on Monday and Thursday mornings) accompanied by a

second reading derived from the Prophetic books (in the Hebrew Bible covering those from Joshua to the end of Malachi). Indeed this forms the central part of the Shabbat service (and various festival services throughout the year) so that the words of scripture are always present and available to be heard. Here we meet the paradoxical reality of a tradition that demands that the text be read with care and precision, so that it is important to correct the reader should he make a mistake, yet it is often read at such a pace that even were it possible to follow it there is little sense to be made of what is said, and certainly no time to reflect upon it. But the dangers of reducing all such liturgical acts to mere mechanical performances was well known to the Rabbis.

Rabbi Simon says: 'When you pray do not make your prayer a fixed formal thing, but an appeal for mercy, a supplication before God'. (*Sayings of the Fathers* 2,18)

In addition to the Pentateuchal passages, the five *Megillot*, the 'Scrolls', are each read in association with a particular festival or fast day: Song of Songs—Passover; Ruth—Pentecost; Lamentations—the Ninth of Av (the fast day in the summer commemorating the destruction of both Temples and other Jewish disasters); Ecclesiastes—Tabernacles; Esther—Purim. Of course merely cataloguing these does not even begin to indicate the particular flavour or inner message each contributes to its particular festival. Thus the exodus from Egypt, with its promise of freedom, is given an even deeper dimension when celebrated with the love poetry of the Song of Songs, expressing, according to the midrashic tradition, the mutual love between God and Israel. That the same book is also read in some traditions on Shabbat evening is a reminder that Jewish tradition sees the beginning of the Shabbat as the arrival of a 'Bride' who is to be welcomed. Sexual intercourse between a husband and wife is encouraged on the night of Shabbat.

Kabbalists teach that on this evening the holy union of the Shechinah [the indwelling presence of God, sometimes seen as the 'feminine aspect' of the deity] and the masculine aspect of God occurs. Its earthly counterpart is to make love out of the fullness, relaxation and joy of Shabbat.<sup>4</sup>

Which is also a necessary reminder that Judaism is a tradition that accepts the unity of body and soul. Thus any definition of spirituality

has to encompass more than just intellectual or emotional aspirations, for it includes the most physical of acts, including eating and sexual intercourse.

In a quite different way the reading of Ecclesiastes, with its sombre view of the transience and insignificance of human life, contrasts with the joy of the harvest festival of Tabernacles, yet also matches the mood of autumn becoming winter. We are reminded that the decorated booth outside our house is also a refugee hut in the wilderness.

To return to the more general theme of the place of scripture in liturgy, large numbers of the classical prayers contain phrases or longer components derived from biblical texts or are derived from specific biblical themes. Some passages, like the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6,4-9), hold a central place in the regular daily prayers. The opening phrase, 'Hear O Israel, the Eternal is our God, the Eternal is One', is perhaps the one 'dogma' of Judaism which is recited, sung and quietly repeated time and time again throughout a variety of liturgical frameworks. The following sentence, 'You shall love the Eternal your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might', becomes the creative starting point for the composition of the blessing that precedes it in the daily services. Thus Jeremiah's phrase (31,3) 'with eternal love have I loved thee' becomes transformed into 'with eternal love have You loved us', so that to God's love of Israel, Israel responds with love through the faithful recital of the *Shema*. But this is a love accepted with full commitment and responsibility—for the recital of the *Shema* is understood as accepting upon oneself 'the yoke of the kingdom of heaven'.

The examples could be multiplied. They attest to a long tradition of total commitment to the Hebrew Bible as the word of God, whose every detail could be examined, meditated upon, and indeed called upon to create and colour Jewish worship. Thus Jewish liturgy, which finds its origins, according to the midrashic tradition, in the practices of the patriarchs (Abraham instituted the morning service, Isaac the afternoon one and Jacob the evening one) sees itself as merely continuing a long tradition of spiritual expression. Moreover in the Book of Psalms it found its model for a wide diversity of methods and modes of worship—from praise and thanksgiving, through petitions, to questioning and even challenging God. The Psalms are so self-evidently at the heart of much of Jewish worship that this hardly needs saying. Special psalms belong to each day of the

week; a group of them (including 92, 93, 95-99) help welcome in the Shabbat; the 'Hallel Psalms' (113-118) are a feature of the great Festival liturgies; others accompany the domestic grace after meals, life-cycle ceremonies like marriage, circumcision, sickness or death. There are psalms to be recited in times of danger and a whole range of others, derived from mediaeval pious and occasionally magical and superstitious practices, which are deemed appropriate remedies for particular problems or dangers. A yiddish proverb sums it up beautifully, 'Don't wait for a miracle, *zog tillim*, recite psalms!'

We have noted three essential components to Jewish spirituality: the *mitzvot*, commandments, as tangible expressions of Israel's covenant with God; study, as the continuing searching out of God's will in all its manifestations; and worship, as the human response, the personal self-revelation to God. The three come together in another saying of the Rabbis, indeed the first that comes after the description of the chain of tradition we cited above:

Simon the Just was one of the last survivors of the Great Assembly. He used to say, 'The world stands on three things: on Torah, on the Temple service and on loving deeds'. (*Sayings of the Fathers* 1,2)

These three interwoven elements describe a flowing of divine energy earthward, its reciprocal human response back towards God, and its outward permeation throughout human society. Moreover they acknowledge the legitimacy of the material alongside the spiritual and the human alongside the divine, in line with a paradoxical Jewish insistence on the worth of human beings despite their apparent insignificance when placed beside their Creator.

What is man that You should remember him, or the son of man that You should care for him. Yet You have made him little less than divine, and crowned him with glory and splendour. (Psalm 8,5-6)

It would be nice to stop at this point with these comforting theological views of Jewish spirituality.<sup>5</sup> But although they are there within the tradition, available and indeed experienced and lived, many Jews find themselves at great distances from them. It would take us too far afield to analyse the sources of this distancing in the Enlightenment and Emancipation, in assimilation to Western culture with its deep secular materialism, and lastly in the unprecedented destruction of the *Shoah*, the Holocaust. On another level, Jews have experienced a form of 'colonialism', though not one



perpetrated by colonists in some remote part of the Third World. Jews, as a minority dependent on the whims of the majority for their survival, have been exploited and 'colonized' within Europe itself, and have acquired some of the characteristics that belong to such situations, ranging from self-doubt to self-hatred. Thus alongside an ignorance of Jewish tradition is often a deep ambivalence about the price paid by having a Jewish identity, an uncertainty that is not unrealistic given the course of so much of past and recent Jewish history. In such circumstances, there are some new trends emerging that might be described as spiritual and indeed related to scripture.

Some are highly problematic—for example the fundamentalistic treatment of scripture by Jews who wish to read out of the Hebrew Bible a justification for holding onto the 'whole' of the 'promised land'. Outsiders might see such trends as mere fanaticism or disguised political expansionism, yet it must be remembered that some have seen in recent history the fulfilment of any number of 'biblical prophecies', a practice not confined to Jews, so that their piety and spirituality are easily harnessed to these dreams. The fact that the biblical record is totally unclear on what constitutes the ideal borders of the land merely allows for a variety of options. Perhaps this uncomfortable reality can also serve as a significant reminder that 'spirituality' is not necessarily a 'good thing'. Those in search of it make themselves open and thus vulnerable, both to influences from without and their own unresolved conflicts and tensions.

On the other hand we are beginning to see an interesting examination of scripture by people who approach it with a whole new range of 'skills', whether they be derived from literary criticism, psychotherapy or artistic creativity. In some ways the Hebrew Bible has never been so available and open to exploration, both within and without classical religious traditions.<sup>6</sup> How far any of these latter activities might be defined as 'Jewish', except insofar as Jews are doing them, remains to be seen. Judaism has undergone many metamorphoses in the course of almost four thousand years, and it is history alone that decides what constituted the authentic continuity out of a variety of new options available at any given time. We are possibly in the greatest period of transition since the tumultuous period that produced Rabbinic Judaism and at the same time Christianity. What ancient or new 'scriptures' will emerge, and indeed what kinds of 'spirituality' will underpin them remain to be seen. The Hebrew Bible has served for two thousand years as the touchstone and talisman of Jewish survival. It may still have much to say to us and some surprises in store.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent, encyclopaedic review of Jewish attitudes to a variety of different matters, including 'spirituality' that is examined under various headings, see *Contemporary Jewish religious thought: original essays on critical concepts, movements and beliefs*, edited by Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (The Free Press, a division of Macmillan, Inc., New York; Collier Macmillan Publishers, London 1987). Also *Jewish spirituality* (3 vols), edited by Arthur Green, 1985. The former is strongest in defining matters in terms of the development of Jewish thought through the Biblical, Rabbinic, Mediaeval and Enlightenment periods, with the Holocaust marking a radical break in this continuity. It is weakest however in approaching the enormous variety of 'Jewish' expressions of spirituality that exist outside the classical tradition—partly, it must be admitted, because it is hard to know what 'Jewish' means in this situation—is everything done by 'Jews' 'Jewish'?

<sup>2</sup> For a popular account of a variety of new (some thirty years ago) 'spiritual' movements in Israel see *The wild goats of Ein Gedi* by Herbert Weiner (Meridian Books, The World Publishing Company, Cleveland and New York, with The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia 1963), and his subsequent book, *Nine and a half mystics*, on contemporary Jewish mystical personalities.

<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to the mediaeval Jewish commentators, see the five volumes of *Studies in Bereshit—Genesis, Shemot—Exodus, Vayikra—Leviticus, Bamidbar—Numbers and Devarim—Deuteronomy* by Nehama Leibowitz (World Zionist Organisation, Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, Jerusalem 1980). Also *Jewish biblical exegesis* by Louis Jacobs (Behrman House, Inc., New York 1973) and my own *A rabbi's bible* (SCM Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> *The Jewish way: living the holidays*, Irving Greenberg (Summit Books, New York 1988), p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> I am conscious that I have not discussed the Jewish mystical tradition. It has informed and influenced 'normative' Judaism at different times, but has remained until recent times the closed preserve of initiates. Today there is revival of interest in it, particularly in the desire to explore the experiential aspects. To include it here we would have to introduce a third Jewish 'scripture', the Zohar, and a variety of classical works that precede it and are influenced by it. The interested reader can now consult the monumental three-volume edition of *The wisdom of the Zohar: an anthology of texts*, arranged by Fischel Lachower and Isaiah Tishby, and translated by David Goldstein (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, Oxford 1989). Louis Jacobs' *Jewish ethics, philosophy and mysticism* (Behrman House Inc., New York 1976) is a useful introduction to the subject, as are other of his books. A short article on the subject by Moshe Idel can be found in *Contemporary Jewish religious thought* (see note 1). The classical presentations of the subject can be found in Gershon Scholem's major books, beginning with *Major trends in Jewish mysticism* (Thames and Hudson, London 1955). For a contemporary approach to Jewish mysticism see, among others, the writings of Lawrence Kushner, for example *Honey from the rock: visions of Jewish mystical renewal* (Harper and Row, New York 1977).

<sup>6</sup> The annual 'Jewish-Christian Bible Week' at the Hedwig Dransfeld Haus in Bendorf, near Koblenz, Germany, has been exploring such interactions for over twenty years, and has inspired similar ventures in Austria and the UK.