

BA-DEREKH: On The Way —

A Presentation of Process Theology

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Introduction

Process theology – a constellation of ideas sharing the common assertion that the world and God are in a flux of dynamic change, of related interaction and becoming – can be unsettling at first glance. We take for granted what it means to be conventionally religious, and those traditionalist assumptions make it difficult to open ourselves to an engaging and explanatory way to conceive and connect to an embracing faithfulness. Much of what Process Thought will offer as an alternative may sound shocking, perhaps even irreligious, if this is a first encounter with process thinking. I want to provide an image that makes it possible, at least, to work through the shock and discomfort to some degree. It is still possible to wind up rejecting this dynamic/relational approach in the end, and that is your privilege too, but the opening image may help create the possibility of a new understanding.

I live in west Los Angeles in a home that was built in the 1950s. Our dining room has wood paneling along its four walls. When we first bought the house a decade ago, the room was painted a sickly green, presumably in the late 70s during the high watermark of the aesthetics of the Brady Bunch and Partridge Family. The actual wood grain and tone were covered, though I think that in that era people thought such a look was cutting edge. With that greenish coat of paint, the walls looked fake and cheap. When we finally got around to repainting the upstairs of the house, we asked our painter if he could just paint the phony paneling a simple white because the green was hideous. He pondered for a moment, then took his thumbnail and scratched on the panel. The paint peeled away, and he said, "You know, I think that under this green there is actual wood." His team spent three days sandblasting and then varnishing. At the end of the week our dining room was transformed! The wood is so rich and the patterns in the grain are magnificent. It is now my favorite room in the house. I had thought, erroneously, that it was the wood itself

that was that sickly green, when in fact, that trashy look was just the coating that someone has painted over it.

Modern Western people often approach religion as I did the paneling: they assume that the only way to be religious is to accept the sickly green overlay of Greek philosophy. They take Neo-Platonized Aristotelian scholastic presuppositions and filter religion through those ideas. Then, because they have insurmountable problems with those assertions, they assume that the quandary involves religion itself, or the Bible, or the Talmud, or observance, or God. What process thinking offers is the opportunity to sandblast the philosophical overlay of ancient Greece and medieval Europe off the rich, burnished grain of Bible, Rabbis, and Kabbalah so that we can savor the actual patterns in the living wood of religion, the *Etz Hayim*,¹ and appreciate religion for what it was intended and truly is.

Problems with the Omnis

Because we are habituated to the pale green overlay, we assume that drab impression is what religion necessarily entails: specifically, the kind of theology that most Christian theologians call “classical,” by which they mean Augustine, Aquinas and the broad spectrum of medieval philosophy – which presupposes that God must be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent.² Based on this presumption, God has – and must have – all the power (that is what omnipotent means).³ God has – and must have – all knowledge, knowing everything that is, was, and will be. God is omnibenevolent - pure good. The challenge for many contemporaries is that certain intolerable consequences result from these three axioms.

For God to be omnipotent implies that no power exists that is not God's, which means, first of all, that any occurrence is God's responsibility. Sometimes we like what happens,

1 “Tree of Life,” Gen 3:24, Pr 3:18 – a favorite Rabbinic metaphor for Torah in the broadest sense, the entirety of God and Jewry’s ongoing revelation.

2 As a religious Jew, while I revere the great medieval theologians – Rav Saadya and Rambam preeminent among them, I reserve the term “classical” for Torah, Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible), and Rabbis (Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash). I think that the medieval sages would have concurred with that prioritization. I acknowledge the influence and domination (but not the normative privilege or superiority) of the Neo-Platonizing Aristotelean scholastic blend, the so-called “classical” philosophical theology– Jewish, Christian, and Muslim – as “dominant.”

3 For a superb presentation of Aristotelian premises and logic in the context of religious philosophy, there is no better presentation than Norbert M. Samuelson, *Revelation and the God of Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 22 – 28.

sometimes we do not; regardless, all that happens comes from God. So God gets the credit for anything good in life; for anything bad in life, God gets the blame. There is no escape from that inexorable logic, which engenders many people's vehement rejection of religion. A God who could have stopped "X" but did not is a God with whom most of us want nothing to do. Everyone, at some point in life, suffers terrible trauma. At the moments that monotheists most need God and a sense of God's love, they are coerced by their Greek-overlay theology into conceding that God must have a legitimate reason to cause (or at least to not prevent) the trauma from occurring. The fault, by default, must be their own. That relentless conclusion leads them to do what far too many Western people have done across the millennia, which is to abandon their moral compass and generally-reliable sense of right and wrong in order to blame themselves or their loved ones when bad things happen.⁴ The inescapable consequence of this theological straightjacket is that not only does something horrible happen, but beyond their suffering, the victim also feels delinquent, abandoned, or punished.

But there is yet another way in which the concept of omnipotence creates an insurmountable challenge. Power is always relational. One has power only to the extent that one has more of it than someone else does. To the extent that one has *all* the power, one actually has no power whatsoever, because power only works when there are two parties engaged in a power dynamic, one the object of the power of the first. Without that relationship, there is no possibility of demonstrating or utilizing power at all. Absolute power is self-erasing.⁵ The philosophical presumption that God is omnipotent was reinforced by the fact that many translations of the Bible refer to God as the "Almighty," which derives from a mistranslation of El Shaddai.⁶ The

4 Job, by the way, provides brilliant evidence here that such a response is not the only Biblical ideal. His theologian friends work to get him to see the logic of accepting the blame in order to preserve God's omnipotence and omnibenevolence, yet Job refuses. God's response is to applaud Job's integrity and vision and to chastise Eliphaz and the other theologians: "I am incensed at you and your two friends, for you have not spoken the truth about Me as did My servant Job (Job 42:7)."

5 See Hans Jonas, "The Concept of God after Auschwitz," *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, Lawrence Vogel, ed., Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996, 138-139, C. Robert Mesle, *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993, pp. 26 – 32, John B. Cobb, Jr., and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976, pp. 52 – 54.

6 See "El Shaddai," in *The JPS Commentary: Genesis*, Nahum M. Sarna, ed., Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989, 384-385.

Torah has terms for great power and unsearchable strength,⁷ but it has neither concept nor term for omnipotent. The prophets have no such term, nor does the Talmud. There is no Hebrew/Aramaic term for being able to do anything whatsoever. In fact that philosophical concept leads to clever theological tricks. For example, a person is more powerful than God because it is possible for a person to construct a weight so heavy that she cannot lift it, but if God is all-powerful, then God should be able to create a weight so powerful that God cannot lift it. But if God cannot lift it (or if God cannot make such a weight), then God is not all-powerful. That kind of conundrum of language highlights the fact that this particular concept of omnipotence is fatally flawed. The Bible and Rabbis portray God as vastly, persistently powerful, yes, but not as all-powerful.

A similar conflict emerges with the claim that God is all-knowing. Omniscience assumes that God knows everything, including the future as well as the past. Nothing is hidden from an all-knowing God. But if God knows the future absolutely, then there is no room for divine or creaturely freedom. Human beings know the future probabilistically: I know that it is likely that if I write in an interesting way, you will be able to focus most of the time you are reading. That is probably true, and I have written and read enough, that I can reasonably expect that what has been true in the past will most likely continue to be true. But I do not know absolutely. Today something could have happened in your life to make it impossible to focus your attention, so that, try as you might to focus, your attention drifts. My “knowledge” of your being able to attend is probability knowledge – my perception is likely to be true. But this kind of statistical probability does not qualify as omniscience. If God knows *as a matter of certainty* that I am going to lecture at 3 o'clock, then where is my freedom to refrain? Is my choosing to speak an illusion? For God to be all-knowing makes real substantive human freedom impossible. And if God knows the future absolutely, then God also knows God's future choices absolutely. Such perfect foretelling strips God of any freedom as well, a contradiction lurking within the dominant theological scheme.

The philosophical conviction that God is eternal, unchanging, and impassable (because to feel is to change) emerges from this welter of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence.

⁷ Psalm 145:3, Job 9:10.

To change, after all, is to either improve (becoming perfect while previously having been imperfect), or to worsen (by having started as perfect and then becoming imperfect). In this line of reasoning, God cannot abandon perfection, and God was always perfect – hence God must be eternally unchanging. For God to be perfect and unchanging, God has to be beyond time, outside of space. Therefore God cannot be changed by the choices we (all of creation) make, by the things we do. God was perfect before creation, perfect during creation, perfect after creation, and in that sense, separate from creation, above creation and time, independent of creation.

That static timeless perfection is not how Jewish traditions portray the Divine, even though that is how many Jewish philosophers tell us we should understand God. Despite the impressive lineage of philosophers (and rabbis) arguing for an immutable, impassible, omnipotent and omniscient God, the Torah and rabbinic midrash portray a God who gets angry, who loves, grieves, gets frustrated and surprised, and who repents!

When the Holy Blessing One recalls God’s children, who are plunged in suffering among the nations of the world, God lets fall two tears into the ocean and the sound is heard from one end of the world to the other — and that is the rumbling of the earth.⁸

As the philosopher Hans Jonas reminds us,

Such an idea of divine becoming is surely at variance with the Greek, Platonic-Aristotelian tradition of philosophical theology that, since its incorporation into the Jewish and Christian theological tradition, has somehow usurped for itself an authority to which it is not at all entitled by authentic Jewish (and also Christian) standards.⁹

The Biblical/Rabbinic portrayal of an engaged, relating, interacting God is no surprise to Process thinkers or to observant Jews, most of whom prioritize religious practice (including study) above theological reflection.

The conflict is basic: A God who possesses unlimited power and knows everything yet to come could have chosen to fashion a very different world. If an omnipotent and omniscient God knowingly created a world in which babies die in their cribs, a world in which people suffer from malaria and expire in mid-life, in which their children are orphaned, then God is responsible for

⁸ *Berakhot* 59a.

⁹ Hans Jonas, *op cit*, 137.

that (and every) evil. If God could have prevented the Holocaust, and chose not to, it is well nigh impossible to consider that God good. In the words of Rabbi Harold Kushner,

A God of power extorts obedience, but cannot command love. A God who could spare the life of a dying child, who could prevent the earthquake but chooses not to, may inspire our fear and our calculated obedience, but does not deserve our love.¹⁰

Some Western theologians would rather deny their moral compass than change their theology. When confronted by such a moral outrage, theologians too often obfuscate behind the term “mystery.” Or they assert that God's definition of good and evil is different from our own. If a million babies murdered is not evil by God's definition, then the term “evil” has no meaning. Such an atrocity is surely evil, regardless of the perpetrator.

Rather than cling to this outmoded (and unbiblical/unrabbinic) philosophical notion of God and power, Process thinking offers a way to recover another biblically and rabbinically dynamic articulation of God, world, and covenant, integrating that portrayal with contemporary scientific knowledge of the cosmos and of life into a speculative philosophy worthy of our engagement.

Insights of Process Thinking

Process thinking recognizes reality as relational. That is to say, our perception of the world as apparently-independent substances that bang against each other and only interact externally is a coincidence of our size and our metabolism. It is an adaptation to our own species' evolutionary needs, but it is not an objective description of the cosmos or of its residents. The cosmos actually is constantly interacting, constantly social, always in process, and always dynamic. That relating should sound familiar to any Jew because our word for that dynamic relating is “*brit*, covenant.” Covenant is always interactive, always connecting, and always relational. This is just like the cosmos: at a quantum level (the very smallest level), there are no solid substances bouncing into each other; there are only probabilities, packets of energy intertwined in their own uncertainty. At the largest scale, our spacetime bubble singularity (or, possibly, the infinitely larger “sea” of eternal inflation seething expansion) reality is eternally

¹⁰ Harold Kushner, “Would an All-Powerful God be Worthy of Worship?” in *Jewish Theology and Process Thought*, Sandra B. Lubarsky and David Ray Griffin, eds., Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, 90.

generating new pockets of spacetime. Only on one size scale (the middle one, ours) can one speak with any coherence about stable, permanent substances. And even on our size scale it is quite clear that we are always on the way, always changing from who we were to who we will become, along with the rest of our dynamic biosphere, planet, and cosmos.¹¹

We and the rest of creation are not static substances. We – and everything that is – are events.¹² To grasp our nature scientifically, we must simultaneously embrace different levels of being, despite our propensity, when we think of ourselves, to focus on our conscious level. But our multilayered reality complicates any simple self-identity. If we think about humans also as collections of atoms, those atoms do not know when they are part of a particular person and when they are part of the air around us, or when they are part of nearby objects. They float in and out of what we think of as “us” all the time. We are completely permeable; in fact, we do not exist on an atomic level, and that level is no less real than the level of our conscious thought. On a molecular and even a biological level, we also exchange with our environment: inhaling air, ingesting food, absorbing heat or cold, sweating, defecating, shedding hair and skin. On atomic, molecular, biochemical, cellular, biosystemic, bodily, even conscious levels, we are not stable substances at all. We are constantly engaging in a give-and-take with the rest of creation, all simultaneously. We are immediately connected to all that came before us, up until this very instant, and with all that exists at this very moment.¹³ Each of us immediately contains in ourselves everything that has led to each of us.

Freedom is an inherent quality of the world because the cosmos and its denizens are relational, dynamic processes. The world is always becoming, always facing possibilities, and

11 This dynamism and relatedness is magnificently recounted in three books: Joel R. Primack and Nancy Ellen Abrams, *The View from The Center of the Universe: Discovering Our Extraordinary Place in the Cosmos* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006), Brian Swimme & Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era – A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*, (New York: HarperOne, 1994), Harold Morowitz, *The Emergence of Everything: How the World Became Complex*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

12 Alfred North Whitehead called this "occasions of experience". See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: Corrected Edition*, David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, eds., New York: The Free Press, 1978, 16, and David Ray Griffin, *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 108-109.

13 Whitehead's word for that is, "prehension" - that we immediately prehend all of existence. See John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976), 19-20.

always making choices. There certainly are constraints to those choices. Past decisions create the context in which we now exist. We each know that in our own lives, choices that we made years ago shape the kinds of choices we have available now. One can choose to stay married to a spouse or not, but having chosen years ago to marry that spouse, our choices are different from what they would be if we had not made that particular choice. We always make our choices from the particular context that is the sum total of our previous choices, the sum total of the world's previous choices.

The world, then, is self-created and self-creating. The cosmos is a partner with God in the becoming. We are partners with the cosmos and with God in our own becoming. We have agency; all creation has standing. The past is offered to us¹⁴, and God meets us in this moment, as in this moment we come to be anew. In every moment we are coming into being again and again. Think again about the level of electrons and protons, and neutrons you are flashing into being, flashing out of being instantly, instantly; over and over again. And, at each moment you are met in the sum total of the choices you made, with the choices you now face. And you get to decide where you are going to go with that opportunity. That moment of becoming - the present - is called “concrecence”, in which everything comes into being. And after you make the choice, the selected option becomes part of God's consequent nature¹⁵. God holds out a choice to you that you are free to take, free to reject, and then God meets you in the next choice, with the next possibility. That means that the future is radically open,

Why was this world created through the letter “ה, hey”? Because the world is an *exedra* (closed on three sides, open on one): you may proceed if you wish.¹⁶

Free will is granted to all. If one desires to turn to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is given. Should one desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is

14 Whitehead called that 'the primordial aspect of God" that part of God that is eternally fixed; the part of God that is unchanging because it has already been decided. See Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman, eds., *Handbook of Process Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 7-8.

15 McDaniel and Bowman, 6.

16 Yehudah bar Ilai, *Menahot* 29b

given.¹⁷

God does not, cannot know the future, because the future has not yet been decided. In choosing to create, God made a world that has the capacity to make choices, too. And therefore, ibn Ezra describes God as the One “Who can probe all thoughts and see all deeds.”¹⁸ God can only know what is possible to know, past actions and current intentions: in the words of the High Holy Day Liturgy: “You know the secrets of the world,” only what is in the category of knowledge, the revealed and the hidden. The future has not been chosen - so it is not something one can know.

“Lover, indeed, of the people,”¹⁹ God is how the source of the creative responsive love that pervades the world. Here I want to mention a particularly useful tool. Dominant theology thinks of God in mono-polar terms: if God is simple, God cannot be complex. If God is eternal, God cannot be dynamic. If God is perfect, God cannot be in relationship: one polar extreme or the other. A Jewish philosopher at the turn of the 20th Century, Morris Raphael Cohen, first articulated the principle of dipolarity, which we have already explored. Process thinkers apply that notion of dipolarity to God and to God's creation.²⁰ Interestingly we find this insight in several Jewish sources, as well:

Am I only a God near at hand – says the Holy One –
And not a God far away?
If a person enters a hiding place,
Do I not see him? – says the Holy One.
For I fill both heaven and earth – declares the Holy One.²¹

17 Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhoh Teshuvah 5:1.

18 Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, Lev 22:31.

19 Deuteronomy 14:1.

20 Most originally, Charles Hartshorne. See Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God*, (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), 1 – 15.

21 Jeremiah 23:23 – 24.

In God's greatness and the bulk of God's might, God created the whole world in pairs, each reflection resembling the other, and each corresponding to the other. For God made them in his wisdom, to make known that every thing has its partner and its reflection, and were it not for the one, the other would not be.²²

Dipolarity is kind of a Yin-Yang in which we comprehend both polarities to understand the fullness of what is in front of us: "Everything that exists in the world is either of a certain essence or its opposite."²³ This dipolarity extends even to God, who is infinite in some respects, and finite in some respects. God is infinite in how God is in potential prior to creation. Having created, God enters into relationship with us, and in entering into relationship there are aspects of God that are finite.

The word "Elohim," the designation for God in that same first verse of Genesis, refers to a contraction. Since God is endless the creation of the world had to involve a contraction of the light, so that God might enter the lower worlds. God remains infinite, and the worlds cannot contain God, but since God desired their creation God so self-contracted, as it were, that they could bear to contain God. It is in this aspect that God is called Elohim.²⁴

God is separate from creation in some respects, and in some respects, part of the creation. The prophet Isaiah proclaims, "Holy, holy, holy - the Holy One of Hosts, God's presence fills all the world."²⁵ God is not separate. God cannot fill something that God is radically distinct from. One can only fill it by being in it; by being co-extensive with it.²⁶ In *Pesikta De-Rav Kahana* we

²² *Midrash Temurah*, Chapter 1.

²³ Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, *Hiddushei Aggadot*, 2:89

²⁴ Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, *Me'or Eynayim*, "Hayei Sarah".

²⁵ Isaiah 6:3.

²⁶ A useful illustration might be filling a pitcher with water, made possible by reality that pitcher, water, and I exist within the same spacetime, are made of the same components, and are thus in important ways ontologically continuous. Were that not so, the connection between me and the pitcher, the pitcher and the water would be impossible. One cannot pour water from a different spacetime bubble into a pitcher in this one!

find, “There is no place lacking the Divine presence.”²⁷ God is not separate from spacetime, God permeates it; God fills it, as the Talmud notes, “God’s presence is in all places.”²⁸ That means that God is eternal in some respects (God's reliability, God's being the steady source of creating, absolutely eternal) and dynamic in some respects. Recall that God’s static eternity is ontology, the study of being. God’s dynamism is hyathology, the study of becoming.²⁹ The details of God's creating - once we move away from the abstract to the concrete - that is always incomplete, in process, on the way: “Whatever was created by God during the six days of creation needs further improvement.”³⁰

Apparently, this ability to exceed previous perfection – to be vulnerable to creation and open to change – includes the divine as well. For example, in the very beginning of the Book of Genesis, after God fashions humanity, we are told “the Holy One regretted having made man on earth, and God’s heart was saddened.”³¹ What does it mean for God to regret and feel sorrow? A timeless, changeless God cannot regret. Regret means being different than you were a moment ago. So the Torah itself asserts God’s dynamism in the context of relationship. Over and over again the Torah emphasizes a God who expresses emotion, a God who is always meeting people in relationship, and changing because of that relationship. God, for Process thinking, is manifest as the ground of novelty. God is to be found in the fact that a universe that is established through fixed, changeless laws still generates novelty all the time; new unprecedented things that did not previously exist. And, in Process thinking, God shares the experiences of all creatures, and is experienced by all creatures:

The essence of divinity is found in every single thing – nothing but it exists. Since it causes every thing to be, no thing can live by anything else. It enlivens them; its existence exists in each existent. Do not attribute duality to God. Let God be solely God. If you

27 Piska 1:2.

28 Bava Batra 25a.

29 See Charles Hartshorne, “Some Causes of My Intellectual Growth,” *The Philosophy of Charles Hartshorne*, Lewis Edwin Hahn, ed., LaSalle: Open Court, 1991, 43.

30 Bereshit Rabbah 11:6.

31 Genesis 6:6.

suppose that Ein Sof (Without Limit) emanates until a certain point, and that from that point on is outside of it, you have dualized. God forbid! Realize, rather, that Ein Sof exists in each existent. Do not say, “This is a stone and not God.” God forbid! Rather, all existence is God, and the stone is a thing pervaded by divinity.³²

Nothing that happens escapes God's perception and experience, and we are always in touch with the Divine. In *Bereshit Rabba*, we learn

From the first day of creation, the Holy Blessing One longed to enter into partnership with the terrestrial world, to dwell with God's creatures within the terrestrial world.³³

God is our partner, dwelling in the world; a statement that no dominant theologian could make, but with which the rabbis are content. “God is the place of the world, but the world is not God's place.”³⁴ God permeates the world. God dwells within the world.

Not By Might, Nor By Power, But By My Breath³⁵

One key shift then, for Process thinking, is that God does not exercise coercive power, God exercises persuasive power. Western people conceive of belief in God, and many concur - both believers and atheists - as affirming a bully in the sky who compels behavior or results from unwilling, passive agents, or who restrains behavior and precludes outcomes that sinning creatures would otherwise pursue. Process thinking dissents, reminding us that God does not work through coercion; God works through persuasion and invitation, through persistently inviting us to make the best possible choice, and then leaving us free to make the wrong choice. But then the instant we have made our choice, God persistently lures us toward the making of the best possible subsequent choice.

God does not break the rules to force a desired outcome, working instead with and through us, with and through natural law. Here is that timely assurance from Midrash *Tanhuma*:

32 Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, *Shiur Qomah to Zohar* 3:14b (Idra Rabba).

33 1:10.

34 Genesis Rabbah 68:9.

35 Zechariah 4:6.

All the might, the praise, the greatness, and the power belong to the Sovereign of Sovereigns. Yet God loves law. It is the custom of the world that a powerful tyrant does not desire to do things lawfully. Rather, he bypasses law and order by coercing, stealing, transgressing the will of the Creator, favoring his friends and relatives while treating his antagonists unjustly. But the Holy Blessing One, the Majesty of Majesties, loves law, and does nothing unless it is with law. This is the meaning of "Mighty is the Majesty who loves law."³⁶

The ancient rabbis decontextualize this verse and construe it to teach that when one talks about God's might, one celebrates God's willingness to live within natural law. God does not "break" the laws of physics, the laws of chemistry, the laws of biology, the laws of morality. In that wondrous way, God's power is not simply an amplification of human power; it is qualitatively superior and unique.³⁷ God works within the constraints of law. The way God works on us, in us, through us is called the "lure," what Whitehead calls, the "initial aim"³⁸ and Jonas calls "the mutely insistent appeal of his unfulfilled goal."³⁹ That is to say, at this very moment (and at every moment) God meets each of us, and all of creation, offering us the best possible next step. We have the opportunity (and the freedom) to decide whether to take that best possible next step, or not. That next step, best of all possible, the initial aim, becomes for us, our subjective aim, what we choose to do.

We know what the initial aim is; we know it intuitively because we apprehend it. We do not have to be told; we are each connected to all, and to the creative-responsive love that God offers. So we intuit the lure from the inside. Sometimes we choose not to make the right choice, or do the right thing because of the other powers that impinge upon us: our physicality, drives, selfishness, desires, or laziness. A wide diversity of excuses accounts for our subjective aim perverting God's initial aim, which leaves God in covenant, hence vulnerable:

36 *Tanchuma*, Mishpatim, 1, citing Psalm 99:4.

37 See Catherine Keller, "After Omnipotence: Power as Process," *On the Mystery: Discerning God in Process*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008, pp. 69 – 90.

38 McDaniel and Bowman, 7; Griffin, 146 – 147, 150 – 151.

39 Jonas, 141.

When Israel performs the will of the Holy One, they add strength to the heavenly power. When, however, Israel does not perform the will of the Holy One, they weaken (if it is possible to say so) the great power of the One who is above.⁴⁰

Here again we meet a dynamic, relating God who suffers, a God who becomes vulnerable in having created us. This is not an all-powerful, impassible, eternal God, but a God so connected through relationship that the best way to describe this temporal, passionate covenant partner is in the language of love and law. Indeed, lawfulness is itself understood to be a manifestation of love. The prophet Hosea understands this, when he speaks on God's behalf to Israel:

I will espouse you forever:
I will espouse you with righteousness and justice,
And with goodness and mercy,
And I will espouse you with faithfulness.
Then you shall know the Holy One.⁴¹

The rabbis recognize this passage as the very heart of the relationship binding the Jew and God, inserting it into the morning liturgy to be recited as the Jew wraps the bands of Tefillin on the arm in preparation for the morning prayers. To be in covenant with God is akin to marriage: "See, God's love for you is like the love of a man and a woman."⁴²

To love someone is to become vulnerable to his or her choices. It is to suffer another's pain, and to exult in the lover's triumph. It is to want to be steadily a partner and helper, and to sometimes be hurt by his or her rejection or bad choices. In such a way, God suffers and rejoices in the world, and with the world: "In all their troubles God was troubled."⁴³ In Psalm 91, we are told, "I will be with him in his suffering."⁴⁴ In Mishnah *Sanhedrin*, Rabbi Meir says, "When a person is sorely troubled, what does the Shekhinah (God's indwelling Presence) say? She says,

40 *Pesikta*, ed., Buber, xxvi, 166b.

41 Hosea 2:21-22.

42 Yoma 54a.

43 Isaiah 63:9.

44 Psalm 91:15.

my head is ill; my arm is ill; I am not at ease.”⁴⁵ Our suffering pains God. God is diminished by our not rising to the best choice. The God of Israel is not merely an unchanging, external perfection (although there is an aspect of God that is unchanging and eternal); we encounter the divine in the dynamism of *brit*, relationship. During the rituals of Hoshanot,⁴⁶ observant Jews march around the sanctuary and one of the hymns is, “As you saved together, God and people, so save us.” There is a dynamic interconnection between God, humanity, and all creation. That interconnection changes how we understand life’s big questions.

It is Beyond My Knowledge⁴⁷: Apprehending Without Certainty

One of the changes that Process thinking encourages is to take pluralism seriously, to approach knowledge in a spirit of humility, relationality, and dynamism. Dominant style theologies of creation present a single telling of creation, or afterlife, imposing a certainty and an objectivity that verifiable knowledge does not mandate. At least from the medieval period into the present, scholars have remained aware that there is no way to step outside of the cosmos to verify or falsify many of our theoretical explanations, no way to prove a definitive single encompassing account for the beginning. As Saadia Gaon notes,

The problem dealt with ... is one on which we have no data from actual observation or from sense perception, but conclusions on which can be derived only from postulates of pure reason. We mean the problem of the origin of the world. It cannot be grasped by the senses, and one can only endeavor to comprehend it by thought.⁴⁸

While it is certainly true that contemporary scientists have “seen” a great deal more than the pre-modern natural philosophers (background cosmic radiation, galaxies and nebulae extending to the visible cosmic horizon, etc.), it also remains true that we cannot explore and test various spacetime bubbles; we cannot step outside of our own cosmos to compare and contrast with others.

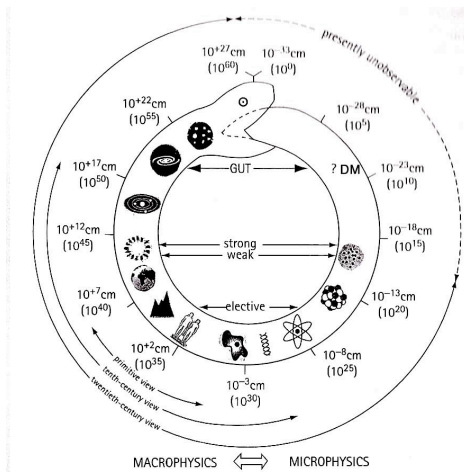
45 Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:5.

46 Toward the end of the Festival of Sukkot, on Hoshanah Rabbah, the day of the Great Hoshanah, Jews march around the sanctuary with their palm fronds, chanting.

47 Psalm 139:6.

48 Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948, Treatise 1, Exordium, p. 38.

Furthermore, we are limited to an intuitive sense that pertains to our range of size and our durations of time.⁴⁹ For size ranges vastly larger than our own (planets, galaxies, spacetime) or vastly smaller (molecules, atoms, atomic particles, and quanta), human intuition and logic is not



reliable, not having evolved to cope with such enormity or smallness. Nor do our common sense perceptions function intuitively with the briefest quantum time intervals or with the expansive duration of cosmic events. In such durations and sizes, the only effective system of human relation and expression (constrained by our scientific knowledge) is the Four M's: **Math**, **Metaphor**, **Music**, and **Myth**. Each provides a syntax and narrative to link our consciousness and existence to those realms of reality

vastly larger or smaller than our own size range, or vastly shorter or longer than the time frames we are evolved to recognize and intuit.

When contemplating the possible origins of this universe, consequently, we are thrown back to a similar position as the medievals – mustering all available evidence and then generating plausible tellings based on our own presuppositions and use of human reasoning.

Creation Renewed Everyday

Instead of thinking of creation as *ex-nihilo*, as if there were nothing existent previously and then, in an instant, everything suddenly existed, Process thinking takes a more developmental view. I think it fair to say that most Process thinkers, beginning with Whitehead (and myself included), understand God as the organizing force of an eternally existing reality.

49 See Primack and Abrams, p. 156 – 166. As they point out, from the limit of our cosmic horizon, at 1028cm as a maximum to the Planck length at the smallest (10⁻²⁵cm), there is about 60 orders of magnitude. Our intuition works near the center, from 10⁻⁵cm to 10⁵cm. At sizes much larger or smaller than these sizes, our assumptions, intuition, and logic no longer hold. The same limits pertain to time frames vastly more quick or more slow than the middle range of our own. The Uroborus chart apparently came first from Sheldon Glashow, in Tim Ferris, *The New York Times Magazine*, September 26, 1982; See also Sheldon Glashow with Ben Bova, *Interactions* (Warner, 1988), chapter 14, and Martin Rees, *Just Six Numbers: The Deep Forces That Shape the Universe*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 8. The version pictured here it taken from *The Oxford Handbook of Religion & Science*, Philip Clayton and Zachary Simpson, eds., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 144.

Such a view surprises those who restrict their view of creation to the first and third sentences in the Book of Genesis, ignoring the second sentence and creation images from elsewhere in the Bible, Midrash, and Kabbalah. The dominant view filters the Genesis telling through a pre-existent ideology of an omnipotent, eternal, impassive Deity, forcing readers to constrain the text within the procrustean confines of an effortless, spontaneous moment that created everything that exists today. Such an approach conflicts with fundamental scientific evidence, such as: the age of the planet, the cosmic materials out of which life is constructed, that living things have developed from previous living things, and the several mass extinctions that have punctuated life on earth prior to the appearance of today's species, to mention only a few. Equally significantly, such a theological imposition (more green paint!) depends on ignoring the 2nd verse of Genesis: "the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water."⁵⁰ So much for taking the Bible literally!

A contextual reading of the opening chapters of Genesis yields the recognition that the unformed and void darkness (*tohu va-vohu*) existed when God began creating. That bubbling, irrepressible depth remains the source of self-creativity, potentialities, and resistance to all imposed power.⁵¹ God's creating is not necessarily one of instantiating *ex nihilo* from without, but rather a process of mobilizing continuous self-creativity from within:

An epiphany enables you to sense creation not as something completed, but as constantly becoming, evolving, ascending. This transports you from a place where there is nothing new to a place where there is nothing old, where everything renews itself, where heaven and earth rejoice as at the moment of creation."⁵²

Because, of course, every moment *is* the moment of creation! This richer view of continuous creation, it turns out, is also reflected in Jewish sources, beginning with the beginning itself. The Book of Genesis begins with the word, *B'reisheet*, which the New Jewish Publication Society

50 Genesis 1:2. All biblical translations taken from JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh: The Traditional Hebrew Text and the New JPS Translation, David E.S. Stein, ed., (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005).

51 See Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2003).

52 Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot Ha-Kodesh*.

version correctly translates as “When God began to create heaven and earth —,”⁵³ with God's spirit fluttering over preexistent *tohu va-vohu*. Chaos is already there, God fluttering over its surface, and then God begins to speak it into increasing order and diversity. By the end of the first chapter of Genesis, God has spoken creation into a symphony of diverse becoming.

At each stage of the blossoming process of creating, God turns to creation itself and issues an invitation, a lure, Let there be 'whatever', and let it flourish according to its own laws, *le-minehu*.⁵⁴ God invites creation to be a co-partner in the process of creating. It is not that God, once and for all, speaks everything that currently lives into existence from the outside. God coaxes, summons, and invites the sun and stars and planetary objects into becoming, then the earth to distinguish oceans and dry land, then to generate plants, and which cascade into increasing diversity of grasses, shrubs, trees and vegetation; God invites the earth to spring up as animal life, and then asks each species to continue its own internal growth by its own inner logic – *le-minehu*, after its own kind.⁵⁵ It is worth noting that God sees creation as a process with developmental stages each with their own integrity and each worthy of celebration. At the end of each day, “God saw that it was good.”⁵⁶ At the creation of humanity and the beginning of the Sabbath, God “found it very good.”⁵⁷ As Robert Gnuse notes, “The statement that God found the creative act of each specific day to be good is highly important, for it means that at each stage of the creative endeavor God stopped and took account of what was unfolding. Perhaps the text even speaks of divine pleasure exhibited at the end of each individual creative act. If we focus on this language in Genesis 1, we may see the cosmic creation as a dynamic, evolutionary process.”⁵⁸

53 Genesis 1:1.

54 Genesis 1:12; 21; 24;

55 See, for instance, Genesis 1:24. Discussion is found in Robert K. Gnuse, *The Old Testament and Process Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), pp,103-107.

56 Genesis 1:4; 10; 12; 18; 21; 25.

57 Genesis 1:31.

58 Gnuse, *The Old Testament and Process Theology*, 102.

We are told in *Massekhet Haggigah* that God “renews every day the work of creation.” That is not a single intervention with a clear temporal beginning and a sharp conclusion after which it is complete; the Talmud is suggesting that God is constantly creating, indeed permeates the process of creating. The *Zohar* takes that even further. It quotes from the Book of Proverbs, “By understanding God continually established the heavens.”⁵⁹ The *Zohar* asks, what does the phrase “continually established” mean?

God goes on arranging the Sefirot every day, and never stops. They were not arranged at one particular time, but God arranges them daily because of the great love and the pleasure that the Holy Blessing One feels for them and for their preciousness in God's sight.⁶⁰

Creation, then, is the process of God luring emergent being into order, abundance, diversity and goodness. Creation is God's inviting creation into the process of becoming. That means there can be no break with natural law at any point in the process. God works with and through material reality. The universe is not merely passive stuff that God molds into shape; it is a co-creating universe.

God created the world in a state of beginning. The universe is always in an uncompleted state, in the form of its beginning. It is not like a vessel at which the master works to finish it; it requires continuous labor and renewal by creative forces. Should these cease for only a second, the universe would return to primeval chaos.⁶¹

God permeates that *tohu va-vohu* stuff and expresses through it the ability to live:

The activating force of the Creator must continuously be present within the created object, to give it life and continued existence. ... And even as regards this physical earth and its inorganic components, their life-force and continued existence is the “word of God,” ... There is a kind of soul and spiritual life-force even in inorganic matter such as stones and dust and water.⁶²

⁵⁹ Proverbs 3:19.

⁶⁰ *Zohar* 1:207a.

⁶¹ Reb Simcha Bunam of Przysucha, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, 2: 17.

⁶² Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tanya*, Chapter 25.

There are two contemporary scientific ways to contextualize the process of continuing creation we have described, each accepted at present by large segments of the scientific community. Each provides plausible accounts of the data we have at present, and each leaves certain large assumptions unproven and unprovable in theory. The two plausible options correspond in broad outline to the two medieval cosmic options – an eternal creation and a creation of space and time as part of the creative act:

- **Eternal inflation** asserts that our spacetime bubble is located in cosmic “sea” of infinite, eternal inflation. This “sea” is sometimes referred to as the superuniverse, or the multiverse, or the meta-universe.⁶³ Within the eternal inflation, only quantum rules govern, although on rare occasions due to long-shot quantum odds, exceptional space-time bubbles emerge into being within which expansion does not pertain. Within each bubble there is a coherent spacetime, and we live in one such bubble. So what we think of as the Big Bang and all of existence, in this understanding, is really one space-time bubble in an infinite sea of eternal inflation that erupts into other new space-time bubbles. In this eternal realm, neither space nor time have meaning – time because it has no direction, and space because it is the same in every direction and in every place. Of course, this eternal inflation, existing beyond spacetime is unverifiable and immeasurable in principle. It lies beyond human cognition or description, in a realm of myth, math, and metaphor (where, it turns out, all human conceptualization and meaning-making occurs).
- **Big Bang theory** starts with the instant in which spacetime exploded into existence, that primal singularity some 14 billion years ago that created the vast cosmos in which we live and move and have our being. The Big Bang itself is held to be inexplicable, the laws of physics fail as we move back in time toward the singular moment itself. Within that singularity, we can only marvel at the

63 Primack and Abrams, p. 190.

remarkable fine-tuning of the major forces of the cosmos, a slight variation of any of which would have made life impossible.⁶⁴

These two understandings of creation – of an infinite, eternal inflationary multiverse or of a singular Big Bang – may be disturbing to people who have read the Bible exclusively through dominant theological lenses, but Jewish traditional voices provide the resources to accommodate both. So let me offer a passage in *Kohelet Rabbah*, which quotes from The Book of *Kohelet*, "As God has made everything beautiful in its time."⁶⁵

Rabbi Tanhuma said, "In its due time was when the universe was created. It was not proper to be created before then; it was created at the right moment."

Assuming there is one universe, it was created at the right moment. If you prefer to think of the cosmos as co-extensive with our space-time bubble (and there are plenty of scientists who do), Rabbi Tanhuma (and many other sages) shares your view. There is no way for us to stand outside of our spacetime bubble to test whether there are other spacetime bubbles let alone an infinite and eternal expansion. It is logic and existential preferences that drive the people who posit multi-verses, not experience. They may be right, but we will never know with certainty.

But that same Midrash goes on to say,

Rabbi Abbahu said: "From this we learn that the Holy Blessing One kept on constructing worlds and destroying them, until God constructed the present one and said, 'This one pleases Me, the others did not'."⁶⁶

In the second part of the same Midrash is the idea of an infinite number of universes of which ours is only one. Apparently ours is not the first generation to speculate on the possibility of previous, perhaps infinite, universes. Apparently these rabbinic sages were comfortable understanding God the Creator, as not having created once, but as the God who is always creating.

64 See Martin Rees, *Just Six Numbers: The Deep Forces that Shape the Universe*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000) and Neil deGrasse Tyson and Donald Goldsmith, *Origins: Fourteen Billion Years of Cosmic Evolution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004, pp. 98-107.

65 Kohelet 3:11.

66 *Kohelet Rabbah* 3:13.

At these two choices – an eternal inflation with repeated spacetimes or a singular spacetime that encompasses all – individual scientists have strong preferences, but science as a whole does not definitively weigh in. We are left with two conceivable possibilities, each scientifically plausible and each religiously compatible with the understanding of creation as an ongoing process that the Bible and Rabbinic sources present. We are (still? once more?) in the position that Maimonides explicated in his magisterial *Guide of the Perplexed*:

It was to our mind established as true that, regarding the question whether the heavens are generated or eternal, neither of the two contrary opinions could be demonstrated.⁶⁷

God may be the One who created everything out of nothing, or the One who creates order out of eternity and infinity. Process saves us from having to weigh in beyond what we can know. We can indulge a little dipolarity here – rather than asserting a false certainty beyond what knowledge can assert, rather than creating a false dichotomy between the two plausibilities, we can embrace both understandings as useful metaphors to orient and motivate ourselves within the cosmos. In either telling, God continually lures this dynamic creation, working in/with/through all that exists to generate greater order, expressiveness, diversity and abundance.

What of the Night?⁶⁸ Evil & Suffering

If God is not the coercive despot who created all as it is, if God is found in the steady relational love that invites creation into diverse becoming, then evil is that aspect of reality not yet touched by God's lure or that part of creation that ignores God's lure.

Another way to address suffering and evil is to acknowledge that much of what we term evil or suffering is a matter of perspective. Maimonides, speaking out of the naturalism that Aristotelian thought makes possible, articulates it best. He points out how often what we term evil is simply our perspective on a particular event:

The ignoramus and those like him among the multitude consider that which exists only with reference to the human individual. Every ignoramus imagines that all that exists exists with a view to his individual sake; it is as if there were nothing that exists except

⁶⁷ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Shlomo Pines, trans., (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1963), II: 22, P. 320

⁶⁸ Isaiah 21:11.

him. And if something happens to him that is contrary to what he wishes, he makes the trenchant judgment that all that exists is an evil.⁶⁹

Much of what we understand to be evil is the very source of dynamism and life. The fact that our planet is churning, so that the rocks do not settle in order of heaviness, but the heavy ones keep getting kicked up to the surface, that is why there is life on the surface. Were it not for the tectonic activity of the core, there would be no life on the surface of this planet. Events that are disasters for some are sources where novelty and development emerge. So the process of evolution is driven precisely by a tension between limits on the one hand and possibilities on the other. Maybe that is why Isaiah says that God is the one who “makes peace and creates evil.”⁷⁰ God has to be *borei ra*, the Creator of evil, because out of what is experienced as evil comes life itself. You cannot have one without the other.

The cosmos itself does not follow God's script, as though predetermined. Every level of the cosmos follows its own inner *hokhmah*, its own inner dynamic, and therefore is in the process of becoming, as are we. As Maimonides goes on to explain, most human suffering is not a divine punishment or test, but is the result of three broad realities of life. The first reality is that it is the nature of material reality to come into being, to grow and flourish for a time, and to then fall apart prior to going out of existence:

The first type of evil is that which befalls people because of the nature of coming-to-be and passing-away. I mean to say because of our being endowed with matter. Because of this, infirmities and paralytic afflictions befall some individuals either in consequence of their original natural disposition, or they supervene because of changes occurring in the elements, such as corruption of the air or a fire from heaven and a landslide.⁷¹

This realm of suffering is the logical manifestation of dynamism and change. The only alternative, a world of static eternity, is one that few of us would choose – even if it means embracing an alternative that also brings suffering and death. And, more importantly, we do not

69 Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, III:12, p. 442.

70 Isaiah 45:7. NJPS translates as “I make weal and create woe.”

71 Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, III:12, p. 443.

have that choice, which is Maimonides' point. It is built into the very nature and logic of materiality.

It is also possible to understand large swaths of suffering and evil as the result of our freedom, the freedom of the entire cosmos. And sometimes we individuals, or humanity at large, make bad choices, and sometimes the rest of the cosmos makes disastrous choices. This accounts for the final two channels we perceive as evil and experience as suffering: "The evils of the second kind are those that people inflict upon one another, such as tyrannical domination of some them over others."⁷² This second category of suffering is the result of human freedom and our ability to impose bad choices on innocent others. This requires no additional supernatural intervention, but is the immediate consequence of our freedom and our relatedness.

The third and final category of evil and suffering is related to the second: our freedom to make poor choices also means that we inflict harm on ourselves when we do not muster the strength and vision to implement the divine lure:

The evils of the third kind are those that are inflicted upon any individual among us by his own action ... This kind is consequent upon all vices, I mean concupiscence for eating, drinking, and copulation, and doing these things with excess in regard to quantity or irregularity or when the quality of the foodstuffs is bad. For this is the cause of all corporeal and psychical diseases and ailments.⁷³

The dynamic, ephemeral nature of becoming, the competing lures that tempt us and distract us from God's lure, our ability to impose ourselves on others and our ability to mislead ourselves – these remain sources of suffering and evil. Process thinking allows us to recognize their sources as proximate, within nature, and not as the judgment or punishment of the Divine. In turn, this realization allows us to continue to perceive God as our ally and strength in times of tribulation, to be able to reorient ourselves to focus receptively on implementing the divine lure before us, to choose as free creatures to affirm those relations (and make those choices) which bring us strength, joy, and health.

⁷² Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, III:12, p. 444.

⁷³ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, III:12, p. 445.

In the dominant theology, an omnipotent, omniscient God becomes the source of our suffering, either actively by commission or passively by refraining from intervention. In either case, it is easy to feel abandoned, betrayed, or persecuted by such a coercive power. In such a theology, evil is a conceptual conundrum, to be resolved through better reasoning. Process thinking opens our eyes to a Biblical/Rabbinic/Kabbalistic view of God as relational and loving. “I am with you, declares the Holy One,”⁷⁴ working in/with/ through us to bring order to the chaos in our lives and societies, giving us the strength and insight to know how to struggle for health, connection, and justice.

Understanding God as the pervasive creativity and novelty that permeates all-becoming invites us to stop *thinking* about the status of evil, and to focus on how we fight for justice and compassion: “*You shall love the Holy One your God*—This implies that one should make God beloved by one’s deeds.”⁷⁵ Evil and suffering are not intriguing theological puzzles; they are existential goads calling us to repair the world. This shift, from ratiocination to action has ancient precedent. The rabbis perceive God as choosing righteous behavior rather than correct belief: “Would that they had rather forsaken Me but maintained my Torah, for the great light emanating from the Torah would have led them back to Me.”⁷⁶

If we are part of creation, if we also have the ability to align ourselves to the divine lure, then evil is a summons for us to implement justice, which is resolute love. What choices must we make now to obviate evil tomorrow? That question beckons as a revelation: what is it that God asks of us?

A Still, Small Voice⁷⁷: Revelation

Process enhances our ability to participate in Revelation. Our museums retain Medieval illustrations of Moses receiving the Torah. The artists portray an arm descending from the sky holding a book, while Moses stands on the top of the mountain, reaching up – straining to grab

74 Haggai 1:13.

75 Yoma 86a.

76 Nedarim 81a

77 I Kings 19:12.

the book that is handed to him! That illustration is, I think, an accurate pictorial presentation of the dominant view of Revelation as shaped by Greek philosophy — eternal God, static immaculate Torah, passive (although worthy) recipient. But if you can entertain a notion of God and cosmos as becoming, of the universe as relationship in process, then it is easy to recognize revelation as also ongoing, relational, dynamic and continuous. That should not be a surprise to Jews who are familiar with the Bible, Rabbinics, and Kabbalah because we find that same openness in our own tradition, as well. Jewish tradition speaks of *Matan Torah*, the giving of Torah *and* *Kabbalat Torah*, the receiving of Torah, both active aspects of a dynamic relationship. Far from being relegated to the distant past, to a single day and a particular mountain, Sinai and the revelation name a quality of relation that is always and everywhere available: “*On this day they came to the wilderness of Sinai* (Ex 19:1). Every day that you study Torah, say ‘it is as if I received it this very day from Sinai.’”⁷⁸ Not only does this continuous revelation apply to the study of Torah (the book), but any fruitful teaching by any sage enjoys the status of Torah: “Everything that a diligent student will teach in the distant future has already been proclaimed on Mt. Sinai.”⁷⁹

This open-ended Torah harvests a living, growing process, a pulsing relationship of love. No mere abstraction or desiccated set of rules, Torah takes concrete form in the specific people through whom it emerges into the light of day. God’s presence is manifest in their specific language, idiom, bodies, and culture. Moving backward through time, we can track this insight back across the ages:

- “The word of God can be uttered only by human mouths.”⁸⁰
- “Likewise with all the prophets and those possessed of the Holy Spirit: the supernal voice and speech vested itself in their actual voice and speech.”⁸¹
- “The Shekhinah speaks from the throat of Moses.”⁸²

78 *Tanhuma*, Yitro 7.

79 Y. Peah 2:17a. See also Sifrei Devarim 11:13 and Y. Megillah 1:7.

80 Hans Jonas, *Memoirs*, 30.

81 Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tanya*, Ch. 25.

82 *Zohar* III, 234a.

- “It is clear that [while God’s precepts are given]through words uttered in Torah, they are also given through words uttered by elders and sages.”⁸³

As the Torah becomes real through the active participation of its human co-creators, the apparent conflict between the Documentary Hypothesis – the method through which God and the sages of Israel produced the Torah we now possess – and the veneration of Torah as the manifestation of the Divine in words finds resolution. Since the Torah represents the response of the Jews to a heightened experience of God – an openness to the Divine lure – it is patently impossible and fruitless to argue about whether the Torah is divine or human. In good dipolar fashion, it is inseparably both. God “speaks” with/in/through *us*.

Recognizing Torah as a Divine/human partnership means that the authority of the Torah is no longer misperceived as coercive. Like God, Torah’s authority is persuasive, an invitation to wisdom rather than intimidation through fear. Jewish tradition labels that fear of consequences the inferior *yirah*. But the superior *yirah* is marvel or wonder. It reflects reverent awe at the staggering grandeur of cosmos, consciousness and life! Such *yirah* responds willingly to persuasive, not coercive, power. This inviting lure is found in the Book of Deuteronomy, when we are instructed to keep the *mitzvot* and observe them, “for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of nations, who when they hear of these statutes will say, ‘surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’”⁸⁴ As we recognize the shift in the authority of Torah from corrosive coercion imposed to bubble-up wisdom offered, the Torah becomes compelling because it is wise, because it is beautiful, because it augments life. Obedience is no longer the desperate attempt to avoid punishment, but the free embrace of life-sustaining wisdom.

In fact, the rabbis make the same point in a wonderful, ancient midrash: Recall how the Jews are gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai. The Torah says they are “*tachtit ha-har* - under the mountain (Ex. 19:17).” The rabbis understand that curious phrase to mean that God “covered

83 Pesikta Rabbati, Piska 3.

84 Deuteronomy 4:6.

them with the mountain as a vat. God said to them, If you accept the Torah, fine. But if not, your burial will be here.”⁸⁵

But you cannot obligate someone into agreement through coercion, even if you are God! So if Sinai is a coercive imposition, then the Jews are technically free of the obligations of the covenant. Astonishingly, the answer the Gemara records is that *we are not obligated by Sinai!* We are obligated to the Torah because of an event during the lives of Mordecai and Esther. When they wrote and disseminated the teachings of the tradition, the Book of Esther records of the Jews, *kimu ve-kiblu*, “they established and they accepted it.” As the Talmud notes, “They established that which they already had accepted.”⁸⁶ It is only because they freely accepted the Torah, because they responded to the divine lure, freely offered and freely accepted, that the covenant linking God and the Jewish people was affirmed. God’s initial aim - take this way of living that the nations will recognize as wise flowed into the subjective aim of the Jews’ response, “we will observe and we will hear.”⁸⁷ That relationship precludes coercion. Covenant thrives in invitation, a mutual yearning.

Such covenantal love also, of course, elevates the place of ethics, and it means that morality becomes the capstone of religious Jewish life. But this has been true from the beginning. Think of the Torah as a mountain; Genesis and Deuteronomy, the base; Exodus and Numbers, the second level; and Leviticus at the peak. And the religious core of Leviticus, the source that organized and gave the book its final form is H, authors of the Holiness Code. The Holiness Code details how to participate in holy community. The peak of Sinai, it turns out, is ethics, as the prophets themselves reiterate. In Jewish religious understanding, ritual matters because it generates ethical seriousness; it creates a pedagogy of goodness and an agenda of grateful inclusion.⁸⁸ Our beliefs enter life through our deeds: “What short text is there upon

85 Shabbat 88a

86 Shabbat 88a.

87 Exodus 24:7.

88 See Joshua A. Berman, *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

which all the essential principles of the Torah depend? ‘In all your ways, acknowledge God (Pr 3:6).’⁸⁹

Chosenness: Servant, Lover, Firstborn

In the dominant theology with its either/or dichotomies, either the Jews are chosen, hence superior, or all peoples are equal and none are chosen. If God is the active choosing partner, then Israel must be the passive recipient of God’s choice. But dipolarity allows us to transcend these binary dichotomies. Israel is an active partner in the process of chosenness: “We do not know whether the Holy Blessing One chose Jacob or whether Jacob chose the Holy Blessing One.”⁹⁰ Another midrash reiterates the reciprocity: “As soon as the Holy Blessing One saw Israel’s resolution, saw that they wished to accept the Torah with love and affection, with fear and reverence, with awe and trembling, God said I am the Holy One your God.”⁹¹

Jews choose/are chosen to live Torah in the world, both to build communities of justice and inclusion and to model that such a life is possible to embody. But other peoples choose/are chosen, too, in other ways. The Torah reminds us, “It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Holy One showered love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples.”⁹² To this cautionary note, the rabbis add:

Not because you are greater than other nations did I choose you, not because you obey My commandments more than the nations, for they follow My commandments even though they were not bidden to do it, and also magnify My name more than you, as it says, ‘From the rising of the sun even to its setting, my name is great among the nations (Malachi 1:11).’⁹³

⁸⁹ *Berakhot* 63a.

⁹⁰ *Sifre Devarim*, Piska 312.

⁹¹ *Pesikta Rabbati*, Piska 21.

⁹² Deuteronomy 7:7.

⁹³ *Tanhuma* (Warsaw Edition), Ekev, Perek Gimel.

Jews choose/are chosen for Torah and mitzvot, although most emphatically not because of intrinsic superiority. Other peoples are chosen/choose their own paths to holiness and righteousness.

This understanding comes not just from modern rabbis and theologians; it emerges from the Torah and Rabbinics, as well. The prophet Isaiah exults, “In that day, Israel shall be a third partner with Egypt and Assyria as a blessing on earth; for the Holy One of Hosts will bless them, saying, “Blessed be My people Egypt, My handiwork Assyria, and My very own Israel.”⁹⁴ He also inquires, “Is it too light a thing that you should be My servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel? I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation shall reach to the ends of the earth.”⁹⁵ We are God's servants both to return Israel to a covenantal life, but also to be a light to the nations of the world. The prophet Amos reminds us that others have been chosen too: “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? Says the Holy One. Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?”⁹⁶ All peoples are God's people; all children are children of God. The rabbis, as well, comment that we chose/were chosen, not because we are greater, not because we are more observant, not because we glorify God's name more; we choose/are chosen because God is discerned in our relationship - to God, to each other, to God's creation, and that relationship is not abstract logic; it is a particular relationship, involving a people, a place, a history, and a way. And relationship is always in process.

Salvation & Afterlife

As it was in the beginning, so it shall be in the end. Our stories of beginnings took advantage of dipolarity to embrace two plausible scientific/mythic tellings: Big Bang *and* Eternal Inflation, each redolent with Biblical, Midrashic, and Kabbalistic imagery and insight. Each of these tellings takes us beyond the limits of empirical knowing (although they are each constrained by current scientific knowledge to reflect a minimal standard of plausibility). Now,

⁹⁴ Isaiah 19:24.

⁹⁵ Isaiah 49:6

⁹⁶ Amos 9:7.

turning to questions of death and afterlife, we seek yet again to peek behind the curtain, where certainty and knowledge cannot arbitrate. Process thinking joins Jewish traditions in offering two plausible paradigms. Rather than the false swagger of pretended certainty, we can embrace the openness of aggadic hope and multiplicity, knowing that truth flashes just under the surface of such tellings.

A Process perspective on death and afterlife affirms the same speculative metaphysics as all process insight: We generally think of ourselves as substances, but we are really organized patterns of energy. Everything is in flux, everything is dynamic, everything is volts of electricity, which is to say, a great light that was made at the beginning and hidden away. As we serially flash in and out of existence, on every level, we are free to determine our next choice, constrained only by our previous choices and the instantaneous impact of the rest of choosing creation. God does not know the future. God knows objectively and retains forever all that has already occurred. Integrating and responding to our choices and actions is one of the ways God changes. After we are offered the initial aim - God's best possible option - we then select our subjective aim, choosing what we prefer. That choice, and series of events, then becomes eternally part of God. God's integration of those events that have been achieved is eternal.

Process thinking allows us to formulate a plausible understanding of life in the coming world (*Olam Ha-Ba*). *Olam Ha-Ba* is the Biblical/Rabbinic term for our continuing as objectively real aspects of God's thought. We are not substances now in life, and we will not be substances after life ends. We are patterns of energy now, and there is no necessity to believe that we will not continue as patterns of energy in God's eternity.

At this point, however, the specifics of the nature of that continuing existence diverge, in Process thinking as is true in Jewish thought as well. Judaism insists on belief in eternal life. The Talmud insists that one who will not proclaim the prayer for the resurrection of the dead is immediately removed as prayer leader,⁹⁷ and Maimonides lists affirmation of the afterlife as one of the core required beliefs of traditional Judaism.⁹⁸ Beyond affirming faith in some form of continuing existence, however, Jewish law is remarkably open. As Rabbi Louis Jacobs writes,

97 Berakhot 26b, 29a.

98 Maimonides, *Commentary to the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin, Introduction to Chapter 10.

Religious agnosticism in some aspects of this whole area is not only legitimate but altogether desirable. As Maimonides (1135-1204) says, we simply can have no idea of what pure spiritual bliss in the Hereafter is like. Agnosticism on the basic issue of whether there is a Hereafter would seem narrowness of vision believing what we do of God. But once the basic affirmation is made, it is almost as narrow to project our poor, early imaginings on the landscape of Heaven.⁹⁹

This religious realism permeates Jewish theology – affirming what we can, specifying only when possible. In this instance, Judaism traditionally affirms an afterlife, but refrains from specifying a single vision of that future. Value-Concept terms — such as *Gan Eden* (Garden of Eden), *Pardes* (paradise), *Gehenna* (hell), *Olam Ha-Ba* (the Coming World), *Tehiyat Ha-Metim* (resurrection), *Gilgul Ha-Neshamot* (reincarnation), *Keitz Ha-Yamim* (End of Days), and *Yeshiva Shel Ma'alah* (Supernal Academy) — circulate in various Jewish conceptions of afterlife, but are never defined with precision or authoritatively. Using the building blocks of these value-concepts, many different tellings of life after death abound within religious Jewish traditions. Those options remain viable for a Jewish Process thinker.

Once our lives are finished and done, we continue — as we have lived — on multiple levels. All of the stuff of which we are composed continues in the world. The atoms that constitute us do not stop with our death. Our proteins are recycled in the ongoing cycles of life. Everything that we are gets reused and continues.

- One possibility is that death marks the end of our individual consciousness. Our energy patterns continue unabated, but there is no governing central organization, no self-reflective awareness that continues beyond death. In such a possibility, we merge back into the oneness from which we emerged. We sleep as discrete individuals and awaken as the totality of the cosmos.
- A second possibility builds on the first, adding the plausible hope that consciousness and identity continue unimpaired. As God is process, and as God is the one who is supremely connected to everything, supremely related, and

⁹⁹ Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology* (New York: Behrman House, 1973), p. 321.

forgetting nothing, we remain eternally alive in God's memory, in God's thought, which, it turns out, is what we have been all along.

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