

ADOM OLAM: THE IMPACT OF RECONSTRUCTIONIST JUDAISM AND EXISTENTIALISM ON RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND PRACTICE

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Mordecai Kaplan in his books *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934) and *Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers* (1956)¹ portrays Judaism as a culture retaining a great heritage of pre-modern answers to perennial questions such as the existence and characteristics of God. The advent of science and technology above all Darwin's theory of evolution, the astrophysics of an expanding universe originating in the big-bang of 10-15 thousand million years ago, perhaps out of a singularity caused by the contraction of the same universe, and its eternal oscillation (Hawking 2001: pp 86-87) and the modernist response of alienation were anticipated by the greatest pre-modern thinker in Judaism Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon in 11th and 12th century Spain and later in Egypt for whom ancient Greek science presented the same problem as modernity does for the contemporary Jew.² In *Adon Olam* we have both a joyful hymn of affirmation at the end of the service, and the same words repeated tunelessly in the "chamber of the dying."³ The song which may have been composed by Solomon Ibn Gabirol in 11th century Spain expresses a post-Biblical lyricism and a classical concern with ontology, the study of Being and beings in relation to Being: its answer is God.

Eternal master, who reigned supreme,	<i>Adon 'olam, 'asher malakh,</i>	אֲדוֹן עוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר מָלַךְ
Before all of creation was drawn;	<i>b'terem kol yetzir niv'ra</i>	אֶבְטָרֵם כֹּל יְצִיר נִבְרָא
When it was finished according to his will,	<i>L'et na'asa v'heftso kol,</i>	לְעֵת נַעֲשֶׂה כְּחֶפְצוֹ כֹּל
Then "King" his name was proclaimed to be	<i>Azai melekh sh'mo nikra</i>	אֲזַי מֶלֶךְ שְׁמוֹ נִקְרָא

¹ These book are quoted by Louis Jacobs in his *The Jewish Religion – A Companion* in the entries under "Kaplan, Mordecai" and "Reconstructionism"

² For Maimonides "13 principles of the Jewish faith" in see *A Maimonides Reader* (edited by Isadore Twersky) pp 417-423

³ "Adon Olam" From *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* including the text and

translation of Adon Olam, accessed 23/11/17

When this our world shall be no more,	<i>V'aharey kikh'lot hakol</i>	וְאֶחָרַי כְּכֹלוֹת הַכֹּל
In majesty he still shall reign,	<i>L'vado y'imlokh nora</i>	אֶלְבָּדוֹ יִמְלֹךְ נוֹרָא
And he was, and he is,	<i>V'hu hayah v'hu hoveh</i>	וְהוּא הָיָה וְהוּא הוֹבֵה
And he will be in glory.	<i>V'hu yih'yeh b'tif'arah</i>	וְהוּא יִהְיֶה בְּתִפְאָרָה
Alone is he, there is no second,	<i>V'hu 'ehad v'eyn sheyni</i>	וְהוּא אֶחָד וְאֵין שֵׁנִי
Without division or ally;	<i>L'ham'shil lo l'haḥbirah</i>	אֶלְהַמְשִׁיל לוֹ לְהַחְבִּירָה
Without beginning, without end,	<i>B'li reyshiyt b'li tah'liyt</i>	בְּלִי תְּכֵלִית בְּלִי רֵאשִׁית
To him is the power and sovereignty	<i>V'lo ha'oz v'hamis'rah</i>	אֵלוֹ הֵעֵז וְהִמְשָׁרָה
He is my God, my living redeemer	<i>V'hu 'Eli v'ḥay go'ali</i>	וְהוּא אֱלֹהֵי וְחַי גּוֹאֲלִי
Rock of my affliction in time of trouble	<i>v'tsur ḥevli b'eit tsarah</i>	אֲצִוֵּר חֲבֵלִי בְּעֵת צָרָה
He is my banner and refuge	<i>V'hu nisi 'umanos li</i>	וְהוּא נִסִּי וּמְנוּס לִי
Filling my cup the day I call	<i>m'nat kosi b'yom 'ekra</i>	אֲמַנֵּת כּוֹסִי בְּיוֹם אֶקְרָא
Into his hand I commit my spirit	<i>B'yado af'kid ruḥi</i>	אֶבְיָדוֹ אֶפְקִיד רוּחִי
When I sleep, and I awake	<i>b'et 'ishan v'a'ira</i>	אֶבְעֵת אִישָׁן וְאֶעִירָה
And with my spirit, my body	<i>v'im ruḥi g'viyati</i>	אֶנְעַם רוּחִי גְּוִיָּתִי
The Lord is with me, I will not fear	<i>Adonai li v'lo 'ira</i>	אֲדֹנָי לִי וְלֹא אִירָא

Reconstructionism and existentialism have in common a philosophical aversion to taking religious belief at face value given that the Holocaust and the continued threat of anti-Semitism, widespread racism, ethnic cleansing, massive inequalities and deprivations of human rights, the threat of hugely destructive climate change and the distinct possibility of the use of nuclear weapons by rogue states and/or terrorists suggests that God is a historically important cultural phenomenon, not an empirical reality. On the other hand, we need some ritual affirmation that *concern* is manifest by *Dasein*, which is Being-There, in relation to being-in-the-world and being-with- the-Other.⁴ Without a

⁴ These concepts are derived from Martin Heidegger *Being and Time* (1926/1962) – see the index references to *facticity, finitude, fallenness, thrownness, Facticity, finitude, the absurd, being-in-itself and being-for itself, bad faith, nothingness, nihilation* are Jean- Paul Sartre's related ontological categories listed on p. 658 in *Being and Nothingness* - obviate Heidegger's mysticism which make Heidegger allegedly liable to Nazism as early as 1926

humane and humanizing Being-There, there cannot be concern, attachment, love. Some children grow up to become psychopathic adults because of a lack of any consistent parenting, inadequate schooling, an absence of youth leadership, poor housing, traumatic immigration from war zones, a failure in income maintenance, inadequate substitute parents and environments who continue to fail them (Rutter 1981: pp. 198-218. "Effects of Migration on Child Well-being" <http://wikiprogress.org/articles/children-youth/effects-of-migration-on-child-well-being/accessed> 27.11.17)

God and religion can be seen as embodying the idea of divine concern and solicitude. The sexual and physical abuse of children whilst under the care of religious and secular institutions and child-care personnel questions the equation of belief in a caring protective God with a God who allows us the free-will to commit atrocities especially in societies undergoing crisis in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, let alone within pockets of extreme deprivation in European countries and the Americas.

On the other hand there is the reconstructionist belief, maintained by Mordecai Kaplan that there is a "power that makes for righteousness, that which is present in the universe and in the human psyche which guarantees that righteousness will eventually win out.[...] Prayer is rather... reaching towards the highest in the universe and in oneself..." (Jacobs 1995 pp 298-299 on Kaplan).

In existentialist terms there is no God outside the universe, and there is no God in the psyche, except insofar as Being-There is authentically caring and concern, and this involves transcending the tendency of Being-There to be *fallen*, to be *thrown* into *facticity*, always in the presence of death because of our *finitude*. To find the *Adon Olam* in our psyche we have to meditate on the presence of righteousness in the natural world and in the *Tselem*, the human being made in the image of the legendary God. In fact altruism helps us transcend the sin into which we are *fallen*. Animals show altruism towards their kin. Because of fallibility or accident we are *thrown* into situations where we sin in the *factual* situation of sinfulness which is often determined by factors outside our control, and where to avoid mortality we think only of our own health and safety, at the expense of others far closer to the *finitude* of death or the closing of options in finitude. On the other hand the manifold heroism of martyrs and heroes who sacrifice themselves for others, both kin and alien, is manifestly present in human societies which have survived tyrannies such as Nazism, Stalinism, white supremacy, and historic systems of slavery and vicious colonialisms and imperialisms.

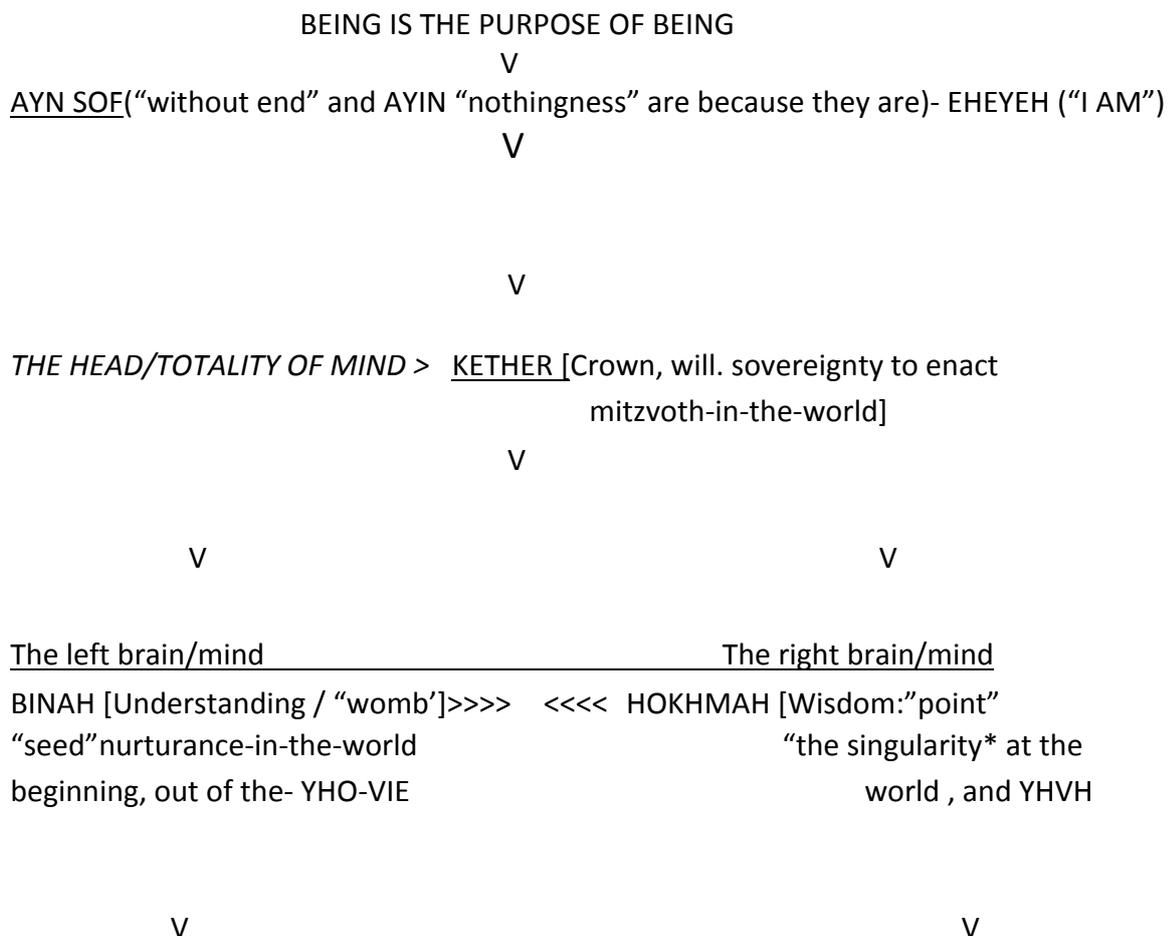
Self-transcendence requires that we understand the presence in Darwinian and subsequent accounts of attachment and protective behaviour in animals, including ourselves as animals living in what cosmologists call our *anthropic universe* (see Hawking as above). God did not produce this both human-friendly and human-repulsive world and universe. A number of universe histories could have

when his attempted deconstruction of Western metaphysics in *Being and Time* was first published).

occurred but may have expanded into infinity or collapsed into pre-space/pre-time before this one occurred which produced the right conditions for human or humanoid life.

Adon Olam then, is embodied in the world and in our righteous being in the world in the form of altruism. Ontological existentialism re-writes Maimonides 13 principles of faith (Maimonides/ ed. Twersky 1971, pp 417-423) in such a way as to reconstruct Judaism.

So, the *First Fundamental Principle of a Reconstructionist Judaism* might be that Being is a transcendent term for the origin of all existence, natural, cosmological and human. God is not nihilated. The reification of altruism in the iconic appearance of God is Real in the Imaginary of the believer, as Lacan would put it (See Bowie. *Contra* Richard Dawkins, God *can* be a valued idea, present in prayer as a catalyst for mediation especially as the *Tselem* in its Kabbalistic form – Adam Kadmon and Chavva Kadmona. What Maimonides says of God is truer of Being reflected in the philosophical person:



The left arm/shoulder >>>>>>> <<<<<<<

GEVERAH power
Judgement in-the-world of El

The right arm-shoulder

HESED
[Lovingkindness in-the-world
YHVH]

V

ISAAC [the AKEDAH- Abraham as
child sacrificer after his regression
[who is ruled by the primitive
unconscious becoming Id]

V

ABRAHAM [humane
ruled by
by Ego-Ideal]

V

V

V

V

The thorax breathing

V

> > >> <<<<<<

TIFERET [Beauty as Compassion]
Jacob becomes Israel at Pen'iel;
Patriarchs and matriarchs
become invocational
ancestors replacing
animal sacrifices in the
Amidah. Jacob/ancestors
become Ego.

V

V

HOD

NETSAH

The left leg: AARON:

The right leg: MOSES:

THE MAJESTY OF RITUAL

THE ETERNITY OF PROPHECY

V

V

YESOD: SEXUALITY

Joseph

V

V

MALKUT - kingdom - DAVID / SHEKHINA - holy presence

The feet on the earth

In *The Zohar*, Volume One (ed. by Daniel C. Matt pp. 110-111 footnotes 22 and 23) a mystical re-translation of the first words of Bereishit suggests “ [With] the beginning created God” and that the indicator of the object “Et” [aleph-tav] indicates God created “ et” before He created “ haShamaim” “v’ et ha Aretz”. “Et” itself is the equivalent of Alpha to Omega, the beginning and the end of the Symbolic sign-universe: “Bereshit bara Elohim et....” [With]the-beginning created God [Who is) et - Aleph-Tav”.

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