

B Q

N

E

THE WORLD WAS CREATED BY LETTERS & NUMBERS
 And further still: When we look at the roots of things, the opening chapters of Genesis, for instance, we have to ask ourselves why has the story of the creation had the effect it has had on so many civilizations and so many people. My answer is: not because it describes things as they once were; not because of the Darwinist disputes it gives rise to – was there evolution or not? Was the world created in seven days or not. These are trivial issues. The truly important question is what do we, as human beings, learn from the story? And we learn that from the very first of His acts God created the world using the selfsame unique thing that we also possess – letters and numbers, language and speech. The message of Jewish civilization from thousands of years ago is that the act of creation was accomplished by the power of speech and number. When, according to Jewish tradition, God said “Let there be light” then “there was light.” The act of creation, that means, was an act of the spoken word, a pronouncement, an invocation, a matter of wording. At the moment when chaos became cosmos and the void became creation, at that moment the spoken word became an instrument in the hands of both God and humankind, equally. When Jewish mystics want to express the same thought, the *Sefer Ha Yetzira*, written about two thousand years ago, says approximately as follows: “When God decided to create His world with the thirty-two ways and wonders of wisdom...” Why thirty-two? –

the 22 letters of the alphabet and the ten numbers. In other words, we can join in too, we too know letters and numbers, we too can count and write, we also command the power to make the potential actual, the chaos cosmos – and merely by the power of words, thought and language.

X

Why did we invent the phrase “the holy tongue” [“tongue” in the sense of language]? Where did we get such a wonderful idea from? And what is holy in the holy tongue apart from its divine source? – the idea that it is infinite, that man possesses exactly that which is the essence of the Divine, spirit, infinitude, the power of creation. What is “divinity?” It is the fusion of all the values which we want without limit and which we can never have too much of. Is there anyone to say there is too much justice, too much wisdom, too much life, too much infinitude? No, these are things we will always want more and more of and which there will never be enough of. Men and women will always be saying: “we need more wisdom, more justice, more peace,” and these are exactly the values which characterize the Divine in Jewish thought.

THE QUESTION IS NOT WHETHER GOD EXISTS BUT WHY MEN AND WOMEN NEED A GOD AT ALL

Sorry and angry as we may be at what has become of those great concepts of wisdom and knowledge and justice and law, painful as it may be to see what they have descended to, and bitter, insulting and humiliating as it may be to see what depths that descent has dragged us down to, for all that, in the beginning they were something to marvel at. The men who said: “You shall love truth and peace and pursue justice with all your strength” and “Honor your father and mother”

H

M

K

A

T

G Y

r

were saying things whose truth can never fail, and it matters not a jot if man or God said it first. Imperatives like these have become a frame of reference men and women can set in front of them like a light source or a flaming torch, a code of noble values of absolute validity, as incontestable then as now. Can we deny the need for justice? Claim that peace is not worth the effort? That there is no need for knowledge and truth and liberty and wisdom? Yet these are human concepts conceived in imitation of God. Whether this God is a substantial God, that is, whether there is a divine reality is totally unimportant. What is important is the conceptual and linguistic tradition entrusted to us, that there exists a complete code of concepts and values requiring to be preserved, expounded, understood, developed and passed on to our successor generations. It is not we who made language. It is not we who created justice, knowledge, peace and wisdom. We have inherited them, bound them up with divine authority and now want to hand them on. What has come down to us from the past and what we want to bequeath to posterity is bound up with the world of the past, with an image of a God, with a divine tradition, divine self-revelations, prophecy. There is absolutely no need to quarrel over the trivial question of whether there is or is not a God. That is totally by the way. The key question is what humankind does with these concepts, formulated as revelations of divine authority, and why they needed divine authority at all? For the concept of human originality and autonomy is a very new one, no more than a few hundred years old. For millennia, authority was always derived from divine revelation and divine revelation was something one did not argue with. And the great majority of the ideas that have come from this source are very worthwhile indeed, very precious ideas, ideas of great beauty.

WHY HAVE WE ALWAYS LOOKED FOR REALITIES BEYOND THE BOUNDS OF OUR OWN REALM?

Our powers being limited and our fate being to die in the dust, it is natural that we have wanted to envision realities beyond our own limitations and is that not precisely what science and the arts and religion and the conception of God are? Our powers being, of our very essence, limited we have never ceased struggling to create worlds and realities surpassing us, in the beyond. Hekhalot literature, composed in the first centuries of the Common Era, contains a beautiful definition of God: R. Akiba, who knew more than any other man, who was reputed to have been to Paradise and come back, was asked what he saw. What did God look like? You were there after all. He returned an answer that has scarcely been bettered: "His face is the face of the spirit, his countenance the countenance of the soul." In other words, I saw nothing that can be described. After all, no one can see his own soul or another's spirit. This is the point of the biblical teaching when it speaks of man's spirit, a hovering spirit, the spirit of God, a creative spirit in the faith of free men – it does not matter what expression is used. We understand that beyond the boundaries of the material there is something else and on that peg we hang all sorts of ideas and imaginings.

WHAT IS THE SABBATH?

It is worth remembering that when we discuss keeping the Sabbath we are not talking about a fracas between political party A and political party B or a slap in the face to kibbutzniks by closing their shops for the day. That is not what keeping the Sabbath means. What does it mean? Sabbath is the idea that men and women have to halt their day-to-day preoccupations in favor of

another idea, one of social justice. The Sabbath is about reminding yourself that there are other things you owe obligations to beyond your total immersion in the day-to-day. To keep the Sabbath you don't need to be religious or secular. You only need to recall that beyond us and the unending rat-race you and I am running all day and every day – and all of us have got important and urgent things waiting to be done – we are being asked to halt our routine for a moment. Not for ourselves, but for the stranger and the orphan and the widow and the slave and the day laborer and all those whose image and likeness were once ours. They are us, a slave people who decided to give themselves the Sabbath as a day of rest from work, as one of the fundamental rights of every human being, even of every animal! In other words, we need to understand the origins of things in order to understand the beauty and justice and wisdom in them, and to distance ourselves from their ugly aspects.

WHAT IS A DIVINE IDEA?

The ideas deriving from God are the best the human spirit has conceived. The fundamentals of justice, of equality, of truth, of law, of authority – all those things that most deserve to be considered the inheritance of every man. What is the acid test of a divine idea? It is an idea whose span of validity is infinite, embracing every person on the planet. Wisdom, justice, truth, knowledge, peace, equality, these are divine ideas. The moment you privatize an idea, the moment you say it belongs to Group A or Group B, then at once you know you have a problem. The moment you take an idea and make it and its divine authority the basis for doing someone harm, then at once you know you have gone badly wrong, because all the ideas which in antiquity were bound up with the image of God were all univers-

als – human obligations, human rights, human wisdom, memory and eternity, knowledge and liberty – except, of course, that we, in our stupidity, have excelled ourselves in corrupting and belittling them as far as was humanly possible.

We must not exchange the great conceptions that were part of the covenant with God for man's petty substitutes. No one, it must be remembered, owns these great ideas. No one owns language, no one owns holiness, no one owns justice, or knowledge or freedom or wisdom, equality or peace. These are all names of God and they are, every one, ideas that we all stand in need of in equal measure. No one can be found to say that there is too much peace and no one will be found to say that there is too much equality. There is only one voice: we need peace and equality and justice and truth and knowledge and freedom, and in limitless quantity.

WHAT DID MAN CREATE GOD FOR?

There has never been unanimity as to the nature of God. There has never been a single answer to the question: What does God want of us? On the contrary. Every century, every decade has brought new envisionings of God's image, of what He wants from us, and of how we should respond. In other words, man is constantly recreating God in his own image and likeness. But what does he need God for at all? Answer: to always remind him that there are longitudes and space and horizons beyond the limits of his body, beyond the limits of his experience, surpassing the limits of his puny size and his time and location, longitudes and horizons that came before and will be after. It does not matter if this reality is a person or an idea. It is an abstraction, the spirit of God. It is the

X
B
place where the spirit of man encounters the spirit of God and the human spirit is dynamic and learns and changes, just as the spirit of God is also never still and unchanging. In that place of meeting where the human spirit is constantly recreating and refashioning God in its own image and likeness, there it is entitled to re-examine, reappraise and revise the meaning of the divine discourse.

Those who take an interest in the changes that have occurred in man's conceptualization of God will come to the conclusion that Maimonides' God is not the God of Abraham and neither is it the God of the Covenant as written. The Vilna Gaon's God is not the God of the Hekhalot texts. The God of the Talmud Sages is not the God of the men who composed the Book of Enoch and the Sefer Ha Yetzira. Century by century, the definition of God, the content of the nature of the divine, the concepts that God represents or which humankind represents in relation to Him, exegesis and interpretation, halakha, aggada and commentary, they are all and always have been in a state of flux. The matter we are dealing with is totally dynamic, totally alive and, to prove that this is how it always will be, Jewish tradition has evolved two equally wonderful modes of thought. One is called the "Seventy Faces of Torah" and the second "Infinitude" or "Endlessness" (einsof).

The meaning of Infinitude is that there are infinite ways of expressing God's existence or being, that there is no one final definition. We are at liberty, as many times as we like, to discover a new aspect of meaning or knowing or apprehension and to actualize it in terms of a domain at some remove from it, a domain we may call now science, now art, now the

authority of the law, now inspiration, now halakha, now the commandments. Every century we can apply new terms, new concepts. But one thing has to be remembered: the acid test remains that what has universal value and benefit is divine and what can do harm is human.

The second idea, that the Torah has seventy faces, is the idea that no one can say there is only one correct version, one truth, one teaching, and one viewpoint. The opposite is true: there are infinite viewpoints, for in this context to say seventy is to say seven hundred or seven thousand. The moment you say that Torah has more than one face, more than one aspect, then there is more than just the pshatt [literal] meaning, there are seventy meanings; there is the pshatt for pragmatic purposes but there are infinite other aspects too.

What are these infinite other facets? They are the infinite number of doors by which the human spirit can enter into the text and recreate it: take each sentence and each word and breathe new life into it, new insights, new relevances, questions troubling our own generation, new definitions of good and evil. God has said what is good and what is evil, but that is only one possibility. We also have the right to fashion and widen and deepen the concepts of good and evil according to the insights and experience our own generation has won.

WHAT HAS GOD CONTRIBUTED TO THE HUMAN SPIRIT?

As a people that has lived in exile 2,500 years – the exile must be reckoned from the destruction of the First Temple in the 6th century B.C.E. – it behoves us

to remember that we have always put our trust in God, even though we each time created Him anew and each time refashioned Him. And had we not had that anchor for our hope and vision, and for our dream of redemption and of the freedom kept for us somewhere, then we would not have succeeded in bringing it all to reality. The question, therefore, is not whether I believe in God but what God has contributed to the human spirit. What has the human spirit accomplished in these thousands of years by virtue of its affinity with the divine idea? What has been the source of knowledge, law, authority and justice bound up with the image of God and what freedom of thought and action has this way of thinking bequeathed to us, a way of thinking that deserves preserving and assessing rather than scorn or vilification or rejection. We should also take note that the same vast domain, containing thought and creativity and spirituality and culture and art, all of which take their rise in religious thinking, is also the inheritance and property and right of all of us, provided only that no one forces anything on anyone, that everything proceeds from choice, freedom, will, and knowledge. And if that is so then everything is possible.

RACHEL ELIOR is Professor of Jewish Philosophy at Hebrew University, Jerusalem and visiting professor at colleges and universities throughout the world. Her research includes the history of Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah, Messianism, Hasidism and Jewish women.

This article first appeared in issue 21 of *Free Judaism*, the quarterly journal of the Israeli Secular movement for Humanistic Judaism. It is reprinted here with permission of the publisher.