

Where is the Spiritual Action?

RABBI MIKE COMINS

1

“If to believe in God means to be able to talk about him in the third person, then I do not believe in God. If to believe in him means to be able to talk to him, then I believe in God” (Schlipp and Friedman, *Philosophy of Martin Buber*, 24). It was only after ordination, at age forty, that I internalized this teaching from Martin Buber. You don’t *think* God; you *meet* God. You don’t *reason* God; you *perceive* God. God is not in a concept; God is in a moment.

I feel most “spiritual” in the most “material” places, like in nature or in the bedroom, and closest to God when hiking, praying, conversing, creating art, making music, or practicing the Taoist moving meditation, qigong. But in my upbringing, abstract thinking about God replaced explicit instruction on how to meet God in the world and what that might look like.

When I think of a religion, I ask: Where is the spiritual action? For Buddhism, it is in the mind; for Christianity, in the afterlife. Jewish practice is well grounded in everyday life, but the spiritual action, I was taught—the divine target of Jewish prayer and ritual—was always in some intangible, non-physical dimension accessed through speculative (and to me, unbelievable) arguments and ideas. Despite a wealth of God-moments, for most of my life, I was a wannabe when it came to belief in God.

What changed? Buber, through I-Thou relation, and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, through awe and wonder, taught me that one gets to God not by taking

a mental turn around the physical world, but by engaging with it as deeply as possible.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner's works made Jewish mysticism plausible for me. When I was taught qigong, based on the same Chinese medicine that brings us acupuncture and other healing therapies, I immediately felt the energy called *chi*. I realized that a central claim of Jewish mysticism is true. *Chiyut*, a Chasidic term meaning "divine life force," and derived from *chayim*, "life," flows through the world, and I can tap into it most anytime I try through deep listening, meditative awareness, and prayer. I embraced the *Zohar*'s description of God (through Kushner) as the River of Light.

Most important, I feel *chiyut* in my body. Once I paid attention to the *feel* of connecting to godliness, my body became a thermometer to measure and guide my Jewish practice. I have learned which activities and spiritual practices, readily and reliably, bring me into God's presence.

Even the most mystical, sublime, "spiritual" moment is experienced in a body. Would it not make more *sense*, and give people the realistic, achievable expectation of meeting God in the everyday fabric of their lives, if we acknowledge that we encounter God, and that we best gain knowledge of the Divine, not through abstract, unprovable speculation, but through the experience of our bodies in transcendent moments?

2

Heschel writes, "This is the most important experience in the life of every human being: something is asked of me. Every human being has had a moment in which he sensed a mysterious waiting in him. Meaning is found in responding to the demand, meaning is found in sensing the demand" (Heschel, *Who Is Man?*, 107–8).

As long as I can remember, I have felt the call to the right and the good. When Heschel explained this to me as a manifestation of the Divine, my intuition was validated.

An all-good, all-powerful God could not let drunk drivers kill innocents, let alone allow the Holocaust. When Harold Kushner suggested that God is not all-powerful (or chooses not to be all-powerful), my intuition was validated.

I do not believe God operates like a super event planner according to a master plan, or that God is an idea, or that God can be reduced to an interior psychological state. Rather, I know that *chiyut* is always running through me, in dialogue with the world. Just as the divine flow influences me, I influence it,

through thought and action. When I pray for someone's healing, I don't believe that I'm petitioning a God who makes human-like decisions as to who will live and who will die. But I know how to build *chiyut*, the divine life-force, within me through meditation and movement, and I know how to send it toward other people through prayer, and I know that it has an effect.

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Life could not have evolved without the rotation of the earth and the motion of continents that create hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis. Human acts of malice are optional, but disease and natural disasters are as necessary as the air we breathe. Since I don't believe God personally decides when and where disease hits, when my mother died of cancer before her time, I didn't ask, "Why her?"

All that sufficed until I experienced the long, slow, painful death of my father due to Lewy body dementia. Then I knew the anger of Job in the face of random, unbearable, undeserved suffering. I cried out in protest—to the God I don't believe in!

I am baffled and offended by the depths of human suffering and human evil in God's good world. Nothing alleviates or justifies the pain.

And nothing makes truth, justice, beauty, and love less noble and extraordinary.

Every day, I say thanks to God for the privilege of living in this marvelous world. When I can't, I stand with Aaron and Job before the mystery, in silence.

3

When an infant cries in your arms, what the child needs becomes your command. When my spouse suffers, what she needs is my response-ability. Buber located I-Thou moments of transcendence, in which we are in dialogue with the world around us from a posture of communion and empathy, as the source of ethics. This prompted Buber to understand that God is present in every moment of genuine dialogue.

For me, God's role in I-Thou is the hardest part of Buber's thought to fathom. Rabbi Eugene Borowitz helped me to understand. God permeates transcendent moments of I-Thou as an inexplicable but real sense of "quality" (Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant*, 101). We feel the call mentioned above by Heschel. We are lured beyond self-interest and moral mediocrity.

I believe God's presence is real in ethical moments because I am not reasoning, projecting, or inventing this invitation/demand that I act my best. I am reacting to it. I-Thou doesn't reinforce my habits, assumptions, and predispositions; it shatters

them. I am called, attracted, and pulled to the right and the good by meeting God's transcendent quality, an experience available to me every day.

Does recognizing God as the source of ethics in moments of transcendence make a difference in our lives? As practicing Jews, we are called to do *t'shuvah*, "repentance," particularly on Yom Kippur.

Most of my life, I dutifully dwelt on my shame and guilt. I thought about self-change and didn't change much. Now the transcendent, right-brain God-moments of a fruitful Jewish, spiritual practice draw me out of my neurotic thoughts and show me what is possible. I am pulled forward, by light and hope.

4

Based on Enlightenment philosophy, modern thinkers compartmentalized science and religion into neat cubicles—science reveals facts; religion generates meaning. Postmodernism emerged as this and similar value/fact dichotomies were proved false.

Science cannot explain everything, and during the previous century it constantly overreached, especially in the social sciences. But when it deals with what it can competently explain, no source of truth is more certain, not to mention more noble, effective, and fruitful, than scientific method.

Truth is not optional for the spiritual seeker. We cannot base Jewish belief and practice on wishful thinking. Maimonides's great philosophical work *Guide for the Perplexed* explicitly integrated the science of the time, neo-Aristotelian thought, with Judaism. It never would have occurred to him, or any other Jewish thinker of note, to ignore or deny the best knowledge available. Otherwise, Judaism becomes distorted or, worse, trivial. We ignore science at the price of irrelevance. Good religious thinking draws on all sources of truth, especially science, for if God did not "create" the world, God certainly operates in the world. (Personally, I think God creates the world every day.)

I would go further. The deeper our encounter with the world, scientific and not scientific, the better our religious thinking. It is no coincidence that Buber begins *I and Thou* by describing his encounter with a tree, or that Heschel develops the components of radical amazement—awe and wonder—to reinterpret and renew the Jewish relationship with God.

The spiritual action is right here.

Source: Rabbi Mike Comins, in *Lights in the Forest: Rabbis Respond to Twelve Essential Jewish Questions*, ed. Rabbi Paul Citrin (New York: CCAR Press, 2014), 8–12.