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THE RELIGIOUS THOUGHT OF A.D. GORDON

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

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To Aaron David Gordon I owe an enormous debt. His writings guided far more than a rabbinic thesis. They have helped me clarify and expand what it might mean to be a religious Jew in the modern world.

I dedicate this thesis to my mother and father whose abundant love has continually allowed me to choose the path less traveled.

INTRODUCTION

It is always hard to write about a person whose legacy has grown to mythic proportions. To most Israelis and many Jews A.D. Gordon is a larger than life national hero, saint, or perhaps prophet; a man whose personal example towers over us. People quote his biographical details with the same reverence as recounting the life of an Abraham or a Hillel. In a confused and fragmented age A.D. Gordon spoke with a clear and sturdy voice. He communicated his deep seated conviction throughout his courageous life. His often ignored writings attempt to explain the intellectual and spiritual foundations that inspired his often admired life.

Gordon is certainly deserving of the title of national hero, but it seems to be a far too passive position for a man whose whole life reflected a vital, searching quality. National heroes are universally loved and praised yet on another level ignored. Everyone knows the story of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. The father of America was the model of virtue. Yet in reality the yearly commemoration of his birth becomes a time for appliance sales and not for appreciation and reconsideration. There is too much that is vital in the writings of A.D. Gordon for

us to allow him to be relegated to the role of national hero.

Yet Gordon is viewed with even greater reverence than just a national hero such as George Washington. His position vis a vis the people has taken on a quasi-religious dimension. He has assumed the role of a saint a la Akiba or even Jesus. His qualification for this unofficial position is his simple, certain piety which seemed to guide his every moment. Pacifist, vegetarian, Gordon lived his higher ethical vision.

It seemed inevitable that the labor movement in Israel would utilize A.D. Gordon as the spiritual backbone of their faltering movement. Much of his life and writings were dedicated to establishing work as a fundamental virtue. Yet his ideas on labor were only the branches of his semi-mystical teachings. The roots were his vision of the absolute interrelatedness of all things in the cosmos. These roots have been glossed over in the race for practical, ideological directives from Gordon's thought. The later ideologues of labor elevated Gordon's remarks on labor to the functional equivalent of a religion. It is their ideological purposes that gave birth to the term "religion of labor." Gordon's religion was much broader and more profound.

This is just some of the baggage that surrounds the man and his thought. The task of penetrating the

mythic dimensions of A.D. Gordon are thus formidable. Such a direct and careful consideration of Gordon's writings will not diminish the stature of a great man but it may uncover an enduring vital quality to students of religion and life.

The focus of this thesis will be on the written legacy of A.D. Gordon. The serious work of tracing Gordon's ideas back to his life experience has yet to be done satisfactorily. It is not within the scope of the present work to do so but it would be impossible to begin a consideration of Gordon's writings without a brief look at his remarkable life.

Aaron David Gordon was born on the holiday of Shavuoth in the year 5616-1856. He was the only one of five children who survived early childhood and so was constantly cared for. As a child he was weak and sickly and doctors' instructions kept him from learning the Aleph-Bet till he was seven years old. He had various tutors in his native Podolia, Russia and at age 14 went to Vilna for a year to continue his studies.¹

His studies included Talmud, Bible, and grammar which is somewhat more inclusive than the standard fare for the Jewish sons of learned parents and grandparents. A.D. Gordon was named after his grandfather Aaron David Gordon, a famous scholar who wrote various talmudic treatises. Despite his deep knowledge, the grandfather refused the position of Rav because he refused to make

his learning a "tool to dig with." We will see that A.D. and his grandfather had more than a name in common; they both had an absolute sense of principle and integrity.²

Gordon's father Uri Gordon was also a pious Jew who was strictly observant in the manner of a mitnaged. The Gordon household was religious but his parents did not interfere when at age seventeen Gordon wanted to study languages. In four years he taught himself Hebrew, Russian, German, and French and read about various subjects and memorized poems in all of these languages. He studied day and night to the point where his parents worried about his health.³

We gain insight into the character of A.D. Gordon in the following incident from his youth. At age seventeen his parents wanted him to marry but he insisted that he first pass his tests for military service. As an only child and a sickly boy he would probably have been excused but he insisted in principle to completing the process. He refused to let his parents bribe local officials or substitute someone in his stead. In the end he was found unfit for military service but he had given evidence of his deep sense of principle.⁴

Gordon lived as a child first in the village of Podolia, but then in the forest when his parents went into the timber business. So although a sickly child,

he was exposed to the beauty and richness of nature as a youth. There can be no doubt that these early experiences of life in nature had a powerful impact on young Gordon though most of his time was spent indoors studying.⁵

He married his cousin, Feigel Tartakov and lived for a while in the town of Obodovka, Russia. It was there that he had his first encounters with Chasidism. They considered Gordon an Apikoros even though he was an observant Jew. He appreciated positive elements of Chasidism but on the whole was very wary of allowing his freedom to be subordinated to a rebbe.⁶

In 1880 Gordon was given a job on the estate of Baron Ginzburg, a distant relative. He remained at his administrative position in Mohilna for twenty-three years. Of his seven children, five died in their infancy.

Gordon was active in the community as an educator and leader. On Shabbat he would speak in the synagogue. His talks varied from education to the national renaissance to issues of the day. The common laborers came to listen even though many could not understand his words. He established a library in Mohilna which he personally supervised. He was also responsible for teaching his son and daughter Jewish and Hebrew studies. This eventually led to his founding a girls' school for Hebrew studies. Though gifted as a teacher he refused to teach for pay on principle. This was the same

principle that kept his grandfather from becoming a professional Rav.⁷

In 1903, the estate in Mohilna was sold and Gordon was left without work. He wanted then at age 48 to go to Palestine but his parents were living with them and would have been crushed. He was torn but that winter his parents died and he decided to go to Palestine.⁸

At the time his only son was in Yeshivah in Lithuania. Gordon had wanted a Jewish education for his son but he was not certain that Yeshivah would be the best place for this education. The son was also strong willed and deeply committed to Jewish learning and practice. His daughter was working as a school teacher and was helping to support her mother. With the family's basic needs cared for Gordon left for Palestine.⁹

Upon his arrival in Palestine he had trouble getting work, after all he was 48 and not accustomed to manual labor, but he refused to accept a desk job and finally found work in Petach Tikvah. He described his first days at work as that of a child reborn. Soon however, the hard work and poor conditions led to a severe case of malaria. He survived because a fellow worker took him in and nursed him back to health.¹⁰

In 1907 his wife and daughter came from Russia. They settled in Ain-Ganim but four months later his wife died and his daughter was hospitalized for two months.

His daughter recovered and lived with her father.¹¹

In 1912 he moved to the Galilee where he spent the last ten years of his life. He worked in Degania, but the work was very difficult for him. Yet his work never got sloppy, he even insisted on stacking the wheat carefully with the ears on the inside. On Shabbat people would come from all over the Galilee to be with him and to gain strength from him.¹² It is not exactly certain when Gordon ceased being an observant Jew, but it happened sometime after his arrival in Palestine.

Even in the egalitarian framework of the k'vutzah, Gordon insisted on some personal privileges. He required a room to write with his own lamp and ink. This room was sometimes the showerroom or the hay loft. He insisted on only one kind of paper, the halves of sheets 15 centimeters square. Also he wore clothes made specifically for him and he never wore colors.¹³

After a long day's work Gordon insisted on dancing. When younger comrades looked too tired he asked "where is your youthful joy, why this gloom and old age in your faces." He would sing his own melodies and dance for hours with his arms around his chaverim.¹⁴

Gordon was a vegetarian but maintained that his was a personal decision. He objected to the public attention a special vegetarian table would create. Godron was a pacifist in the midst of continual armed struggle. His only weapon on guard duty was a whistle.¹⁵

In 1921 Gordon developed cancer. He traveled to Vienna for special treatments but it was diagnosed as terminal. He wanted to return to Palestine to die. Those who spent the last days with him talk of his absolute calmness at his approaching death. Like all aspects of life, Gordon viewed death as a "natural phenomenon."

Gordon died in 1922 and was buried on the banks of the Jordan among trees and flowers. On his tombstone is the title of his most important essay and the subject of much of his life: "Man and Nature."¹⁶

From 1909 on Gordon wrote many articles some of which were published in "Ha-Po'el ha-Za'ir". Posthumously a five volume complete collection of his writings was published. Gordon appointed Joseph Aaronovitch as his literary executor. Aaronovitch edited his complete works and wrote an important biography of A.D. Gordon. Though little tampered with, the complete collection is flawed. The essays seem to cry out for a sensitive and gifted editor. It takes great patience to sift through the important essays without constantly being sidetracked and confused. Several attempts have been made to reconstruct clear versions of the essays. In 1935 N. Teradyon edited a one volume Kitzor Kitve A.D. Gordon. He notes in his book exactly how he arranged the material from the complete collection. In 1937 Dr. Frances Burnce translated Teradyon's edition into English in a volume "Selected Essays." There have

been other anthologies of Gordon's writings published mainly by Zionist organizations. It seems, however, that it is time for a new reconstruction of Gordon's essays but this is most certainly beyond the present study.

There are some good secondary works on Gordon, written mostly by the Israeli scholars Eliezer Schweid and Shmuel Hugo Bergman. Schweid's book Ha-Yahid: Olamo Shel A.D. Gordon is a very good introduction and explanation of Gordon's basic ideas. Bergman has written a variety of articles on Gordon with perhaps the best insight into the inner and outer worlds of Gordon. There is other secondary material but little of enduring worth.

The major problem facing any study of A.D. Gordon is how to systematically treat a decidedly unsystematic thinker. Gordon writes about ideas more in the manner of a painter than a trained academic. With words he paints pictures of his semi-mystical experiences. As we will see, he is very wary about the over dependence on intellect in our perceptions of the world. Gordon's ideas are compelling and insightful but at the same time elusive and slippery. This elusive quality seems to be deliberate on his part. For Gordon, what can be dissected and analyzed is not the essential thing. Direct experience with life is central but even the best writer is hard pressed to capture this quality.

For instance, Gordon's notion of ultimate reality

dominates every page of his writings yet his was a non-rational understanding of the Ultimate. We catch glimpses of what Gordon means by God but never in a straightforward way. The material's difficulty should not deter us from trying to penetrate to the substance of Gordon's experience and reflections. The vital insights bid us to continue and make our way through the often difficult material.

The emphasis of this thesis will be the religious thought of A.D. Gordon. The reason for this focus and not on his philosophy of labor is that religion and ultimate reality are the most crucial aspects of Gordon's thought. It is the root to all of Gordon's ideas. One cannot understand anything about Gordon's thought if one does not understand what he means by religion and the Ultimate. It informs his ideas on labor, the Arab-Israeli question, the problems of civilization etc. And though his notion of religion is unconventional, by most functional definitions it is still a religion.

CHAPTER I

Every age has its critics, whether political, economic, or cultural. The late nineteenth century was no exception with its Marxists, utopian socialists, nationalists, anarchists, and positivists. In such a milieu it would be easy to miss the voice of another critic of European civilization. Within Jewish and Zionist circles, criticism of European culture was widespread and here too it would be possible to miss yet another rejection of European civilization. Nevertheless, in the crowded noise-filled arena of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Europe, the voice of Aaron David Gordon is audible.

Gordon's critique does not come in a vacuum. He clearly has peers and influences but there is a newness in the way that Gordon treats any subject. Gordon's critique of human civilization is not the product of lively discussion in a Viennese or Berlin coffeehouse and then explored in writing during leisurely mornings in his study. He was not a professional critic and in fact most of his writings are constructive and positive. His critique of civilization, like all of his writings is not systematic. There is no one essay that deals specifically with the

malaise Gordon perceived but rather material can be culled from several of his important essays.

Gordon's critique is not populated with lengthly considerations of anti-semitism or the plight of the workers or the erosion of Jewish life and religion. His categories were far broader and much more basic. Life on the planet suffers and is in need of regeneration, nothing short of the revitalization of life will make a difference.¹⁷

Gordon expresses the dilemma of human existence in the mythic setting of the Garden of Eden, before and after. In our primordial past man/woman's soul was one with the universal soul. People were a part of the life of nature. Call this state, life in the garden. With the first appearance of human thought people became self-conscious, removed from the natural world. Man/woman began to feel different from all other beings. This is the period when having "eaten of the tree of knowledge--or after he had acquired knowledge in some way--he was cast out of his world, driven out of his garden."¹⁸ As we will see below Gordon does not advocate that we abandon the double edged sword of cognition and attempt to return to the garden. We will see that our intellectual side can be very positive but with it we are removed from nature or set above nature.

Gordon held that people related to the world

through **הכרה** , intellectual knowledge or **חוויה**
a term Gordon coined signifying immediate experience.

הכרה is described as a mirror by which the mind acquires impressions about the world. Reflecting his post-Kantian world, Gordon acknowledges that "intellectual knowledge does not perceive the thing in itself; only impressions of the thing."¹⁹ Though possessing reality, the world of intellectual knowledge is removed from the vital world. Intellectual knowledge is crucial and important but cannot gain access to the essential "I" within all of us. Intellectual knowledge as a mirror, reflects things in isolated static ways. By intellectualizing we pull an activity out of the flow of nature and hold it in our minds, and analyze it, and once accomplished we have succeeded in isolating it from the constant flow and vitality of the living world.²⁰

Human beings have another way of relating to the world. Gordon calls it **חוויה** or intuitive, immediate experience. For Gordon "immediate experience is superior to intellect. Intellectual knowledge is a part, while immediate experience is all."²¹ Intellectually we can analyze the form of water as H_2O , describe its properties and uses, which is quite different from immersing oneself in the ocean. Immediate experience allows people to be one with the activity or thing involved. It often has the sense of a mystical union

with the natural world: "he feels with all his being that in some special way he is united to this universal and eternal creation. And this unity is so deep that man does not see himself attached to this creation or loving it any more than he sees himself attached to himself or loving himself."²² In this respect he differs from Buber. In Buber's I and Thou relationship the two individuals never merge; they have a deep affinity but always remain separate.²³

Human beings are capable of relating to the world by intellectual cognition or by immediate, intuitive experience, however, the dilemma of civilization is that we have allowed intellectual cognition to dominate immediate experience. Not only has intellectual knowledge dominated but immediate experience remains "defective and undeveloped."²⁴

The goal for Gordon is not to live solely in the realm of immediate experience. That would be to lose consciousness, to return to the garden before the tree of knowledge or to return to the womb. Gordon cannot be accused of trying to circumvent the problems intellectual knowledge has created within civilization by attempting to return to a pristine past: "Does a return to nature imply a return to the state before civilization? It seems to me that no such demand has been made or will be made. That is absurd . . . For in the end, intellectual knowledge is also one of the basic foundations of

life."²⁵ In Buber's system this is the realization that by necessity many of our relationships must be I-It, even though we value more highly the I-Thou encounters.²⁶

It is through immediate experience that we participate directly in the world. Intellectual knowledge helps us comprehend the depths of what we live. Intellectual knowledge is not just to be tolerated, it can also yeild profound insight. By sensing and living we feed intellectual knowledge with a battery of sensations with which intellectual knowledge can understand the interrelatedness of all things. From our particular sensations intellectual knowing can imagine our participation in the infinite stream of universal life. Thus from the vantage point of one solitary person, the intellect gives us the wider deeper vision to see how we are part of an infinite reality.²⁷

Intellectual knowledge removed people from life amidst nature. Civilization is essentially the result of our intellectual side and has been built on a fundamental separation from nature. Consciousness and knowledge along with the civilized world they have created are the flame of a lamp according to an often used analogy to a lamp. The oil for the lamp comes from an immediate life within nature. What has happened to our civilized world is that we lack the real fuel and nourishment from the realm of nature:

The loss in the sphere of ideals, in creativeness is the heaviest toll exacted by severing the connection with the harmony, with the superior influence that nature exerts. . . There is no longer altruistic love, no longer faith, or idealism, or justice or truth. There is only an 'Ego' which remains unsatisfied; There is a stomach, lust, ulterior motives and self-deceit.²⁸

As a substitute for direct contact and life within nature civilization has two artificial ways of relating to nature: art and science. "It seems that science and art are trying to confine nature, the one to cram it into laboratories and research institutions, the other to wall it up in museums and art galleries."²⁹ Through our temporary excursions and indirect contact with nature we try to observe, enjoy and use nature. By abusing nature we have abused our own human nature to the point where we are but caricatures of real people. With this fundamental rift we have become exploiters of nature and other people. This is the cause of our personal and collective poverty.³⁰

Gordon rejects those pathologists of European civilization that identify economic and social structures as determinative. People have become distorted and deformed by their separation from immediate life within nature. It seems that this distorted state fuels man's quest for power and domination. For Gordon this hunger for power might be an inevitable part of our humanity but what is certain is that artificial society and culture have sent this quest for power and domination out of

control. Gordon rejects the claim that the exploitation of man and nature is the result of the need to secure our elementary needs: "What is essential to such a man is not the fulfillment of his vital needs, not even the desire for luxury, for a magnificent apartment and furnishings or for a beautiful woman; the main point is that for him all these things be more beautiful or more expensive than those which are owned by others."³¹

Gordon further proves that it is not the wealth but the power that wealth provides that is central. He taught that if we gave the rich their money and possessions but withheld honor, influence, and power to rule that the whole business would lose its appeal. This greed for power is not just found in the wealthy but in all people: "the sage in his wisdom, the artist in his creation, even the righteous in his goodness seeks it; each wishes to reveal his individuality, each wishes to influence and frequently to rule."³² The root of the evil is not the social order or the political system but rather the desire for power. Gordon notes that in his day power resided in money but that the future might transfer the power to science. In the past power was held by religion and those men who aspired and achieved power in religion were for the most part "not men of great and profound spiritual capabilities who sought God in order to satisfy a deep, inner need."³³

If Gordon's critique ended here our situation would be hopeless indeed. We are not determined to live a life of power questing nor are we perpetually divorced from the immediate life of nature. A life of unbridled egoism or searching for glory, physical pleasure and power is typical of an early stage in human development, for Gordon it marks "the childhood of humanity."³⁴ We are capable of much better. We are capable of going beyond our particular egoistic desires and participate in a collective human life. Collective with other people, and collective with all of the infinite natural world. This process of opening ourselves up to the expanses of ourselves and our universe Gordon calls

חַיַּת הַחֲפִצּוּת or a life of expansion which is contrasted to חַיַּת הַקִּיּוּץ or a life of constriction. What exactly Gordon means by these terms will be explored later with greater care but suffice it to say that we humans are not eternally condemned to a life of constriction.³⁵

Gordon's basic categories are universal. The task before humanity is "the regeneration of human nature out of universal nature."³⁶ Logically from this we might have imagined that Gordon would ask all people living in Europe to search out a life within nature wherever they are in order to begin the process of regeneration. We expect universal and international solutions from such a cosmic critique. But instead

Gordon sees the process of regeneration beginning with individuals, then families then families of families or peoples, which will lead to a universal/international harmony. Peoples/nations are organic entities not intellectual or political constructs. The global regeneration begins with these entities returning to vital lives with nature and the collectivity. And so moving from the general to the particular Gordon arrives at the predicament of his people, the Jewish people.

The Jewish problem for Gordon was that the Jews of Europe were alienated from their authentic personal and collective selves by virtue of their estrangement from nature and their land and culture. Jews were aliens, dispersed throughout the world believing that they could become people in general; "There is no such creature as simply man in the world. There are Russians, Germans, Englishmen . . . (the Jew) becomes an unnatural Russian, German and so on."³⁷ Floating in Europe, hiding from their natural selves can never lead the Jews of Europe towards the regeneration so desperately needed.

Gordon is certainly not advocating simply nationalism as it came to be propagated in Germany and Italy. His notion of the collective life of the people does share common aspects with romantic nationalists like Mazzini,³⁸ especially when he describes that "in nationalism there is a cosmic moment when you may say that the spirit of the physical nature of a people's

homeland becomes fused with the spirit of the people."³⁹ But Gordon does not describe the destinies of these collective bodies with any sense of hierarchy. There is a unique national spirit and culture to all authentic peoples/nations that live on their land with their people and with nature.

The regeneration he describes is not to be accomplished by socialism especially the material socialism of the Marxists. He of course objected to materialism of any sort whether it be scientific or socialist but he also objected to non-materialistic aspects of socialism. He detected a mechanistic quality in the life and acts of socialist party disciplines. Sometimes there were sparks of truth in their positions and ideologies: "but when you examine it all closely, you find that it is the breadth of a vast army on a great battle front, not the breadth of the world; the flight is of an airplane, a zeppelin with all its tumult and noise, not the flight of an eagle, not even of a little free bird."⁴⁰ The nationalism and socialism he opposed were unnatural constructs of human consciousness not the organic principles of collective groups in direct contact with the natural world.

Gordon's ideas about the nation/people and the need to be authentic to one's individual and collective self is a theme found in other Zionist critiques of Jewish life in the galut but in Gordon's outlook it

takes on a new perspective. His ideas about ending our exploitation of Nature and each other echo the socialist battle cries but again Gordon did not mean it in quite the same way. He found civilization and religion increasingly stifling and oppressive but they were not inherently evil. They have been cut off from the vital source of life: Nature. Human society and religion are not doomed to decadence but concepts of society and religion in his time were. Gordon did not set out to solve the Jewish problem or the problem of Judaism, but in his overall vision of cosmic regeneration, Jewish life and religion would be revitalized to its core as "the pure human relationship towards the essence of existence in all of its phases."⁴¹ Zionist questions, political economic questions, religious questions are not addressed directly in Gordon's outlook but they are answered while he attempts to answer the larger question facing humanity "how to vitalize human life."⁴²

CHAPTER II

A.D. Gordon grew up in the traditional Jewish world of eastern Europe and lived the life of a traditional Jew up till a few years after his arrival in Palestine. Gordon, unlike many of his contemporaries, did not run from Jewish practice as if escaping from a prison. All religion was not oppressive but institutional religion has the tendency to miss the point. Instead of helping people relate to the Infinite One, religion had become stale and stifling. Religion narrowly conceived and practiced must be abandoned, but not essential or authentic religion which helps people to relate to "the essence of existence in all its phases."⁴³

Gordon's expanded sense of religion could not fit within the institutional structure of Judaism. As intellectual knowledge removes an experience from the flow of vital nature so too had religion restricted our immediate experience of the Infinite. The living soul striving for regeneration moved further and further from religion: "This happened particularly where abundant nature offered the soul matters so deep and wide, so rich that it was distracted from religion and did not notice its absence."⁴⁴ This soul referred to

in the above passage resembles the religious odyssey of Gordon. Gordon did not flee traditional Judaism hoping to be irreligious, he ironically left to live religion more fully and directly. Gordon's substitute for traditional religion was not the often ascribed "religion of labor." This term is an external description which Gordon does not use and which is very misleading in understanding both his critique of religion and his positive description of religion.

In Chapter I we noted that originally human kind was in direct and constant contact with the Infinite until cognition interrupted this union. After that there has been a fundamental rift or separation from the Infinite One. This has been the problem of civilization. But religion, for Gordon, is the way we can overcome or endure this primary rift.⁴⁵

Gordon notes some stages in the growth and evolution of religion. In the earliest stage everything besides human animal needs fall under the rubric of religion: "All that man lives and functions as a man, all that he feels, thinks, questions as a man is religion. . . an inarticulate longing, a hidden amazement locked in the recesses of his soul--everything in nature is God. . ."⁴⁶

Primitive people had not yet removed themselves from a vital direct contact with the natural world. They are not self-conscious or developed in intellectual

matters. They are not plagued with questions of belief in God, they cannot even ask the questions. The primitive person's soul "is filled with vital certainty, the certainty of life which precedes intellectual doubt."⁴⁷ Sometimes it seems that Gordon romanticizes the primitive person's lack of self-consciousness in the natural world. But as we saw in the previous Chapter, intellect has been a double edged sword, that is, it not only cuts down but also shapes things positively for us.⁴⁸

Thus religion evolved not out of clear consciousness but out of "gropings of the soul."⁴⁹ During this evolution a serious discrepancy develops between form and content in religion. The content of religion is essentially the possession of the individual while the form of religion is the possession of the group, the society, the nation as a whole. The group is more sluggish than the individual hence the "form of religion has always lagged behind progressive thought and spiritual clarity."⁵⁰ Not only does the form of religion lag behind but it becomes petrified. At this point the religious forms become oppressive and stifling but religion is still central and vital; only now it must find its regeneration outside the bounds of institutional religion.

Judaism also experienced an arrested development of religion as well as a decline. Even though the Jewish people "developed its religion to a high level,

to the concept of the complete oneness of God, it was not saved from being dominated by form over content."⁵¹ He cites as evidence for this the fact that the prophets were not far from the point of abolishing sacrifices but the institution of sacrifice was so established that "to this very day, those who pray, pray for the return of the sacrificial service within the sanctuary of the House of the Lord."⁵² The people were unwilling to permanently abandon this form that had become spiritually outdated.

As the ghetto walls fell many Jews did not walk but ran into the modern world, without looking back, "we realized that the traditions of our fathers were not compatible with those which grew and developed within us."⁵³ Many Jews constrained by Judaism sought desperately to abandon the religion's form and content, not being able to separate religion's two aspects. Few emancipated Jews approached the matter by asking what in Judaism has been obscured or outdated in form only confident that "its essence is seeking a more enlightened, a more noble form, since it is alive, fresh and only aspires to a lofty regeneration."⁵⁴

The developmental process that Gordon saw in religion has not permitted religious forms to grow and develop organically. The form still remains from the first formative period of human nature and has acquired a traditional rather than a living sanctity. The impact of this has been to greatly inhibit religious progress.

Not only has religious growth been impeded but this limited practice and understanding of religion has fueled hatred and divisiveness throughout history: "the religious expression, therefore, which could not be the same for all peoples and for all languages, once having become petrified was built into an iron wall separating those who gave it a different expression."⁵⁵

Granted much of religion has become irrelevant and inhibiting but the greatest tragedy is the development of Gordon's time when "the tub was overturned and the child together with the bath water went overboard, the vital religious content together with the old petrified expression."⁵⁶ Gordon noted that modern thinking relegates religion to mythology, "a lullaby harking back to the infancy of the race something capable of putting older children to sleep even today."⁵⁷

And why has religion not died completely? The answer Gordon gives is simple yet powerful: "Religion will not die while there is a human soul in the world, a sense of human responsibility and a longing for human life."⁵⁸ Religion cannot die according to Gordon, it is part of the substance of our humanness, man/woman is "homo religiousus."

Gordon's life and teachings are an attempt to nurture that basic and essential part of our humanness. Religion is the most important and central dimension of human life. The breadth of Gordon's writings endure as

a testimony to his effort at recapturing this lost or contorted dimension. We will attempt to follow his attempt at regenerating our sense of religion which he felt would be the key to regenerating civilization. For Gordon "pure, natural life, a life amid nature and with nature, a life expressing the sense of higher unity and higher responsibility--this is true religion."⁵⁹

The next three chapters will attempt to reconstruct the fundamentals of Gordon's positive notion of religion. In the language of Jewish studies this will be how he treats God, Torah and Israel. In the language of the sociology of religion, this will be how Gordon viewed religious theory, collectivity and practice. Joachim Wach used these three as the criteria for determining what constituted a religion.⁶⁰ Gordon definitely addresses these three central areas though not systematically. Gordon's ideas amount to a "functional religion." A religion, to be sure, different from traditional or even non-traditional Judaism, but a living definition of religion. Using these three categories of religion we will examine the specifics of Gordon's unorthodox religion.

CHAPTER III

Aaron David Gordon's world was suffused with the reality of the Infinite's presence. By any definition Gordon was a God intoxicated man. This ultimate reality was not an intellectual concept with reasonable proofs. It was as immediately known as the air we breathe, as life sustaining and as primary but also as elusive. Whatever can be explained or conceived of in detail certainly is not the ultimate reality. It eludes most of the common names people have given to it. Gordon himself uses a variety of terms to point beyond to this reality: God, Nature, the Infinite, the cosmic element but he does not seem to be especially attached to any one term for they are all, in the final analysis, inadequate.

Nature is essential to Gordon's sense of ultimate reality and he describes numerous mystical experiences with the natural world. Some have suggested that his close association between Nature and ultimate reality approaches pantheism. We will have to explore this question on the way to understanding the main reality of Gordon's life and religion. Gordon's understanding of Zionism and labor do not inform his notion of this cosmic reality but the reverse is most definitely

the case. Nothing can be understood about A.D. Gordon without uncovering what he experienced as ultimately real.

For Gordon, encounters with the Infinite happen mostly from life lived within the natural world. One readily encounters the Infinite in the expanses of Nature rather than in moments of prayer or in reflecting upon events in history.⁶¹

Having left his job as a bureaucrat on his relative's estate in Russia, Gordon at age 48 became a day laborer in the fields of Palestine. His response to his daily contact with Nature goes beyond the expectable exhilaration of fresh air and renewed vitality from physical exertion. Gordon felt a tremendous affinity to even the tiniest blade of grass. He realized that he too was a part of this natural world and shared a deep unity with the cosmos. Here is his account of one such encounter:

Sometimes the work is difficult, clogged with pettiness; together with all this, it may happen that in your soul there is born a feeling like that of cosmic exaltation, like the clear light of the heavens, you are deeply stirred. At times you imagine that you too, are taking root in the soil which you are digging; like all that is growing around, you are nurtured by the light of the sun's rays with food from heaven: that you too, live a life in common with the tiniest blade of grass, with each flower, each tree; that you live deeply in the heart of Nature, rising from it all and growing straight up into the expanses of the vast world.⁶²

This account of Gordon's mystical union with all the world is certainly not an isolated experience. In fact as a person develops, through cognition and immediate experience, this relatedness to all things increases and leads to other mystical experiences: "the individual soul of man cleaves to the soul of all creation and becomes one living soul. . . the more man develops, the more his sensation and cognition deepen and widen; and the larger his store of knowledge becomes the greater his need for life within Nature."⁶³

One can have such an experience by simply living close to the natural world. There is also a more cerebral way to come to this comradeship with all of existence. It is to sense our own insignificance in the cosmic scheme of things. In traditional Jewish categories this is known as sensing our human createdness in the presence of an awesome God. For Gordon this awareness helps us see more clearly our position in infinite existence: "Only out of a recognition of his own insignificance can man attain superior forgiveness, superior reconciliation, superior truth, and perhaps even supreme love and holiness."⁶⁴ This heightened awareness of the interrelatedness of all things has definite ethical implications rather than simply being an exhilarating feeling: "out of that depth will come a sublime unity and a sublime responsibility."⁶⁵

Gordon tells of many mystical experiences of union with the Infinite. This experience of a higher unity made ethical demands on him as he related to creation. But even if we were not able to have these mystical experiences of union, we could still infer the Infinite from the high sense of ethics we find in our world. Implied is the idea that a high sense of ethics must point beyond itself to a ground for these values. This reality that ethics points to is God:

When for example, Buddha, the apparent atheist demands from people, especially from himself, conduct in accordance with a higher ethical code--this, in itself, is an unconscious acknowledgement of God, greater than that of an avowed believer. In general, there is in the spiritual attitude of Buddha toward nature and toward life, more of God than is found in the faith and conduct of certain religious priests.⁶⁶

This use of ethics as an indication of an underlying metaphysical foundation is not unique but rather seems to be part of the general post-Kantian heritage found among various thinkers up to the present time.⁶⁷

If the Infinite's presence is so available and real to Gordon than why did most of his contemporaries view God questions as outdated and irrelevant. Gordon's response is similar to his response to charges that religion has become petrified and stifling. It was not essential religion that had died, only the restricted sense of religion. Well so too with God. Our limited conceptions of God have died but the reality of the

Infinite can never die. Many have claimed that "God is dead, without realizing that it is only the antiquated, petrified concept of God that is dead, not God, the Unseen, Whom you meet in everything you think and feel, Whom you cannot grasp nor overtake. . . the Unseen will never die."⁶⁸ For Gordon, his age was plagued with decadent concepts of religion and God. These limited conceptions served to blind individuals into seeing "no inner link between itself and the Infinite, since it does not see that the Spirit giving it life is the Divine Spirit."⁶⁹

Conceptions of the Infinite were limited in Gordon's time but by definition they must always be limited. In this respect Gordon is in the company of many of the great philosophers and theologians of Judaism. The inability to conceive of God adequately harkens back to Maimonides' negative conception of God. This theological approach claims that it is impossible to define and so limit the Limitless One: "the critical question therefore is not: is there hidden wisdom of God, but is hidden wisdom, is God, conceivable?"⁷⁰ Gordon's answer brings us back to his basic twofold notion of our perception of the world: cognition and immediate experience. The way of cognition, though valuable, tends to separate people from the vital flow of life. So too with approaching God through intellect. The Infinite cannot be described or analyzed but one can

directly commune with the Infinite through our second way of perceiving: immediate experience.

People feel or comprehend in the depth of immediate experience that there is another form of life varying essentially from the form of life which he experiences through intellectual knowledge, we feel ourselves a solitary atom in the broad expanse of the universe. . . we feel with all our being that in some special manner we are united to this universal and eternal creation.⁷¹

So we have seen that immediate experience is the most effective way of perceiving the Infinite but what is it that we are perceiving? Clearly it seems to have something to do with Nature. When one translates Gordon one is compelled to capitalize ~~930~~ or Nature. It seems that by Nature Gordon means something more than just the physical world in its entirety. Gordon feels that there is a vital force flowing through the natural world but it is not the natural world itself.

The tree, the flower, the animal, the bird--the beauty of their form comes from the life that is in them; the degree of their beauty is in proportion to the broad and deep current of life which flows in them. . . they do not seem to have a solid body, but some rippling, ethereal fluid which through the functioning of some hidden power flows continually. . .⁷²

Gordon hardly intends the above observation to pass for a scientific treatment but rather to reiterate what poets, artists and religious seekers have been observing since time immemorial, that the natural world abounds with vitality. It is not only animate Nature but also inanimate Nature which can embody these vital forces: "when you are with Nature and observe, for example, a

rock having no apparent form or beauty in its form, you seem to see in every point of it some force of existence, apparent or hidden, some secret of existence, a symbol of higher silence, some mystery of the universe."⁷³

In this example the vital force seems to be separate from natural objects.

In only a few instances does Gordon ascribe to Nature independent power. One such isolated comment suggests that Nature is somehow benevolent vis a vis our human existence: "Nature watches over us and invisibly cooperates with us."⁷⁴ This does not appear to be a dominant or consistent theme, however. On the whole cosmic reality includes more than Nature, though through Nature we come to an awareness of the vastness and interrelatedness of all things.

In response to the charge of pantheism in Gordon's thought, we lack conclusive proof either way. Nature and God are definitely related but do not seem to be the same reality. Primitive people, in Gordon's developmental theory, seem to have fallen victim to pantheism: "everything in Nature is God."⁷⁵ To these primitive people divine reality is an animating power interpenetrating and infusing all beings and entities of the natural world. Part of Gordon wants to romanticize the primitive person's total immersion in this animated vital, sacred world. Our world, however, is considerably different. Sometimes the language Gordon uses to

describe the vital forces within Nature sound like they are ultimate powers themselves, but we should not let his literary exuberance lead us to believe that God and Nature are one.

Perhaps the modern term panentheism would be appropriate for Gordon's thought? Panentheism is when God is more than the universe, more than a name given to the totality of things, but the universe is in God.⁷⁶ This is speculation however, and another alien concept applied to the more elusive reality Gordon experienced.

Gordon's ultimate reality is the absolute unity of the guiding spiritual and natural forces in the universe. As in other mystical systems the reality of the Infinite is most accessible in the natural world. As we will see later Gordon does not reject or deny the importance of history but he does not view history, as much of Jewish tradition has, as the primary arena of God's revelations. He does not deny that the Infinite could be experienced through the events of history but he does not say that we should seek God there. Our way toward a mystical union with all things is through Nature, which can best be achieved by חויה or immediate experience.

CHAPTER IV

The collective life of man like that of other animals is founded, essentially, upon the family. Out of this smaller unit has developed the larger family: the **אומה**.

In the midst of the myriad of artificial groupings that modern life throws us into, we also find natural organic entities. These organic entities are not organized around political ideologies or shared religious beliefs or practices. They are at once more primal and more compelling. The collectivity has definite ethical implications beyond merely regulating society.⁷⁸

The individual, as we have seen, is constantly trying to reach out and experience the Infinite. This is often achieved by directly experiencing Nature. This reaching out to all of existence can also be experienced through the life of the individual within the collectivity. The collectivity, the people, the nation, is a natural organic grouping, and one that serves the highest function of expanding one's egotistical concerns to the far reaching ends of the "collective soul" and the Infinite.⁷⁹

As we will see Gordon's sense of collectivity is not put forward at the expense of the individual.

A strong individual is a prerequisite for participation in the varying degrees of collectivity: "The cosmic order of the expansion of life starts with the individual, proceeds to the family, then to the people and from the people to the race and then to the whole of humanity."⁸⁰ The current flows both ways and not just from the individual to the collectivity. The collectivity fills the soul of man with infinite life.

Gordon uses the metaphor of a funnel to express this relationship between the people and the individual:

The people may be likened to a funnel: at its wide receiving end, endless existence is poured in, while through its concentrated restricted end the funnel empties its contents into the soul of man. The people therefore, is the force which creates the spirit of man. It is the link which unites the life of the individual to the life of mankind and to the world at large.⁸¹

As much as we have been alienated from Nature we have been alienated from the natural human bond of peoplehood. So the regeneration of humanity is at least two fold. First we must return to a creative life amidst Nature and then reestablish and foster the organic bonds of peoplehood. Gordon will define the role of Zionism from this two fold path of regeneration: "the regeneration of the collective life, of human life in general--and Jewish life in particular which is cut off from Nature, cut away from all natural life--depends primarily on the regeneration of the people/nation which is in turn based on the

regeneration of families."⁸²

It would be possible to misinterpret the central role of the collectivity in Gordon's writings. Gordon does not seem to mean that the individual attempts to submerge himself in the people, though sometimes he comes very close to advocating this. We must then proceed carefully in our reconstructing Gordon's understanding of the individual and the collectivity, both separately and how they interrelate.

The first, in Gordon's organic series of entities, is the individual. Gordon is utterly emphatic when he states the centrality of one's individuality: "no culture, no ideal in the world is worth the loss of one's ego," he states further that "man must oppose with all his mental powers. . . all that threatens to obscure his individuality."⁸³

Gordon knew intimately now a collective movement could usurp the individual's rights and dignity in the name of nation, justice etc. Though he left Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution, he experienced the power of the events leading up to it and even the revolution itself from Palestine. Unlike many other Jews and socialists, Gordon remained sceptical about the developments in Russia. His prophetic analysis came early on and pierced to what was really going on without our post-Stalin vantage point.

Even among the Russian people, who are supposedly fighting for justice, for a new life, the liberty of the individual, the life of the individual is not respected. . . The degeneration is especially clear when we see that the most tender and sensitive hearts have become so inured to it all that they are almost reconciled to the maxim that the end justifies the means.⁸⁴

It seems clear that Gordon was well aware of the tyranny that groups and ideals can have over the individual and therefore insists upon defending against such tyrannical collectivities. A noble relationship towards oneself predicates a noble relationship towards all things, "toward nature, toward man, toward all that lives and all that exists."⁸⁵

Gordon continues by constructing an elaborate argument about the centrality of being an individual. He uses the persons and teachings of Nietzsche and Tolstoy to make his points and then applies the need for individuality to national/collective bodies.

Tolstoy had to be Tolstoy given his nature and experience. It would have been inauthentic if Tolstoy had stumbled upon some of Nietzsche's ideas and then pronounced them. "And had he poured into it all his genius, all the powers of his great soul, it would have been a dreadful lie, a spiritual lie, which is infinitely graver than an intellectual lie, since he was not rooted in the same sphere as Nietzsche."⁸⁶ And the reverse would be true if Nietzsche had propounded Tolstoy's ideas. Both could only put forth

what their individual experience and nature permitted.

Gordon next launches a scathing indictment of Joseph Micah Berdechevsky, the Hebrew writer and disciple of Nietzsche. What was brilliant and authentic for Nietzsche is totally inauthentic for Berdechevsky. Gordon felt that Berdechevsky should have allowed his thought to grow out of Jewish soil. By doing so he might have shed light and discovered new horizons but instead he merely adopted Nietzsche's doctrines. Instead of being a true individual, Berdechevsky became "a mere commentary on the ego of Nietzsche."⁸⁷

The example of Berdechevsky is a lesson for individuals but also for collectivities. For the individual the moral is that one must be authentic to yourself and to the primary experiences of your people. For the collectivity, each must follow the peculiar historical and primal experiences of the group. For the Jewish people who ape the peoples of Europe there is a fundamental denial of self. "This is the power of European hypnosis over us."⁸⁸

All of the above discussion of individuality and authenticity leads Gordon to his affirmation of Zionism. To return to Nature, our land, our language, our community of sentiment, that is the answer. Zionism does not become an ideological imperative but rather becomes the "holistic" cure for a terrible disease. It at once returns the Jewish People to Nature and to its

organic collectivity. It puts Jews into a healthier state.

Like other Zionists of the time Gordon was not positive what this organic/natural state would produce. He had no definite plan for what cultural and social changes would be effected, only a profound confidence that it would be better and it would at least be ours. The historical element of Jewish religion and culture has helped sustain us through the long suffering in the Diaspora, but it is fundamentally lacking the natural/cosmic element; that element which roots us directly to Nature and the Cosmos. So without being specific Gordon believes this cosmic element will renew and reshape Jewish life: "life follows no roads: life renews itself and is renewed without a fixed program. The future will tell. It seemed to me that one point can be made: that this nationalism will be nearer to Nature, more influenced there by the cosmic moment."⁸⁹

So in Gordon's unsystematic way he outlines the fundamentals of a national renovation program but not an ideology of political or spiritual nationalism. By healing this fundamental rupture the political structure would become more egalitarian and just. For instance Gordon maintains that upon our return and our collective regeneration "there should no longer be such distinctions as rulers, leaders, teachers, heroes, prophets, supermen, benefactors of humanity and then the rest of

the people . . . every man must maintain his integrity, must conduct his life according to his own inner sense."⁹⁰ It has the sound of socialist rhetoric but with Gordon it is better described as simply what is natural.

As an organic entity the people/nation has a life or soul of its own but is not simply the sum total of all the individuals. Something very unique happens when the individual is participating in the life of the people: "It is a kind of melody that blends all voices of the soul of a nation so that they express themselves in the symphonic harmony of national life."⁹¹ Through the collective, the individual is able to feel himself in union with the people, similar to the mystical sense he feels with the natural world. In these moments he feels a unity, a deep affinity to the collective personality. His experience and understanding are extended thus losing purely egotistical concerns.⁹²

There is a deep interrelationship between the various people of the nation: "For religion, in the final analysis is the tie by which all personalities of the nation are united into one collective personality."⁹³ This seems to contradict Gordon's earlier insistence on the centrality of the individual. Here the individual seems to lose himself or blend into the collective personality. Yet if we see this as a mystical union similar to our immediate experience of nature we will at least be comforted that his notion is different from

a tyrannical nationalism. Through the direct experience of Nature and the people, one is put into touch with the larger, universal categories and removed from a narrow, egotistical perspective of the world.

There are definite ethical implications of this feeling of unity with the people as there were also ethical implications to communion with Nature. From our participation in the life of the people, we learn and live brotherhood. The inner unification of the nation helps orient the individuals toward common ideals and responsibilities. As Franz Rosenzweig noted the profound impact of communal prayer,⁹⁴ so does Gordon declare the extra significance on Yom Kippur of the people united in a communal heshbon nefesh: "the individual as an individual can take stock of himself everyday. . . but as in every national deed, especially of a religious, national character, strength is important, strength which is increased when the individual personalities gather together."⁹⁵

There have been many reasons given for being a Jew. Gordon's is quite basic. Our Jewishness is an organic natural component of our beings. Furthermore one does not have the option of being a person in general: "there is no such creature as 'man' in the world. There are Russians, Germans, Englishmen and so on . . . And to the degree that the Jew destroys the natural Jewish foundation in his soul, he substitutes

an unnatural foundation."⁹⁶ Not only is Jewishness a given, but it also provides access to a world of meaning not open to the singular, isolated individual. The Jewish people simply is. Through Nature and then the people the Jews can realize their two fold way to regeneration.

CHAPTER V

The third central area that any religious teaching must address is guidance for living the religious life. Gordon has much to say regarding religious practice and ethical behavior. His idea of religious practice follows naturally from his notions of the Infinite and the religious community. Gordon's religious practice does not follow naturally from Jewish practice and customs. At all times it is evident that Gordon's religion was nurtured in Jewish soil but often times Jewish practice is cited merely as a point of departure and contrast. Even without the rigorous and specific mitzvah system of traditional Judaism, Gordon's system has its own commanding authority. It comes when one understands one's position in the natural universe and naturally feels compelled to live in accordance with a universal harmony.

Gordon describes how he spent Passover one year in the Galilee. The historical element of oppression and freedom is no where evident. The part of the holy day which becomes central is spring. No seder, no matzah, but a time of introspection and communion with the Galilee brimming with spring life:

It was spring time; I came to the Galilee ten days before Passover. Spring was in Nature and spring was in our hearts . . . The days before the holiday and the holiday itself were spent in talking, in observation, in listening--in an inner turmoil. Now, after the holiday, I am at rest--that is with Nature . . . Nature has made calmness--I was united to it; my spirit was revived.⁹⁷

This Passover rite is not of the same genre as the ham and cheese sandwiches served on some Hashomer Hatzair kibbutzim on Yom Kippur. It is not a diatribe against the more traditional observances. It is rather a recapturing of a seemingly less important dimension of the holy day, the natural dimension.

Gordon does not hostilely attack specific practices of traditional Judaism. In fact in a short essay on Yom Kippur he seems to be mournful about what the secular settlers have lost by ceasing to observe the holy day. It was a day that the people devoted to introspection and weighing the values of life. All of the individuals felt as part of a single exalted organism. Gordon says it really does not matter if the whole nation had such a lofty conception and practice of the holy day. The fact is that during many generations it was a time for spiritual accounting, and heart-felt worship. It functioned that way for many Jews and Gordon wonders what will happen to the nation without Yom Kippur:

I ask is this day for us only an inheritance from the past? Do we not really need this day . . . If the day will cease being what it is, and will become an ordinary day like other days, will it not involve a great human and

national loss. . ."98

Gordon's comments seem to be directed here to those of his generation who would see no positive benefit to the holy day's observance. Gordon does not sound convinced that the new nation could achieve the sublime content of Yom Kippur in a new form. Gordon seems to be suggesting that there is a way to use the content of Yom Kippur in a new way. "Did we attempt to probe fully, to ponder deeply the question, what really has become antiquated, unsuitable: what has become useless or decayed?"99

Gordon acknowledges that the living core of Jewish piety formed a solid base during our long, painful history. Such a religious core is not thrown together in a few years. One cannot live a religious life "out of the ramblings of an ignorant soul without any living fundamental kernel."¹⁰⁰ Gordon ends this line of speculation optimistically as to the possibility of incorporating aspects of traditional religious life in new forms. "In the final analysis, did we ask: what has been obscured or obliterated in form only while its essence is seeking a more enlightened, a more noble form, since it is alive, fresh and only aspires to a lofty regeneration."¹⁰¹ But the thought and the unfinished essay do not systematically explore this optimistic and for its time unusual idea.

So despite a positive relationship to the content

of traditional religious piety, Gordon is not committed to Jewish practice as it was known. The question therefore is just what was it that filled the religious life for A.D. Gordon?

Gordon's proposed religious way is frequently called חיים של התפשטות or a life of expansion which is the opposite of חיים של צמצום or a life of constriction. A life of expansion occurs when a person goes beyond a self-centered perspective, and instead sees himself connected to the infinite universe. This allows him to have a much broader perspective than self-interest. Gordon frequently refers to a mother sacrificing her own life in order to save her child as a prime example of this way of living: "When a mother sacrifices her own life to save her child. She does so not because of a moral duty nor the sake of an ideal. She has extended herself beyond her own life, into the soul of the child which has become dearer to her than her own soul."¹⁰² This kind of experience is not the result of moral reasoning or intellectual deliberation but it is attainable through immediate experience: seeing herself and her child as almost one. The main obstacle preventing people from living a life of expansion is the "narrow individualism which blocks the path to a superior life."¹⁰³

People live in a constant tension between the sublime impulses that would lead to a life of expansion

and those that would narrow and restrict our vision and experience. There is a real part of us that wants to constrict our world to the narrow limits of self.

"Opposed to this there lies within the soul of man a mysterious and counter tendency, a hidden longing for something beyond and above egoistic satisfaction."¹⁰⁴

People are able to live the life of expansion partly because we are endowed with emotions not found in other creatures: "in the aesthetic feelings: in love, in mercy, in knowledge, in truth and so on; in other words, through channels by which life from all universal existence flows into man."¹⁰⁵ We can further reach out to this expanded life by relying more on immediate experience and living within Nature and within the community. We can help overcome our egotistical tendencies by living true community in our families and nations/peoples.

A major component of the religious life is working the land. This component is usually all most people seem to know of Gordon's ideas. It was his emphasis on the cosmic importance of labor that gave birth to the term "religion of labor." The ascription is misleading. It sounds like a concept a group of socialists full of ideology would come up with. Gordon on the other hand does not value labor in and of itself, but rather⁹⁵ as a means of expressing the human relation to Nature. Working the land is a type of communion with the Infinite.

It is the means of achieving what is truly desirable, the unity with soil and life opens one to communion with the cosmos as a whole.

Work is a religious experience on several different levels. On the first level, labor is a way to directly experience the Infinite. Gordon's exalted sense of physical work goes far beyond simply sweating and feeling invigorated:

When you will pause a moment to straighten your body, to draw breath, you will not inhale air for breathing but you will feel that you draw in something else, something subtle which you do not know, but which will enrich your heart and your mind, . . . you will have moments in which seemingly your whole being melts into the Infinite.¹⁰⁶

These comments about the exalted, mystical experience of work come in his major essay called "Man and Nature" and not simply in his essay on "Labor." That fact helps support the notion of how religious and not self-validating is his notion of work.

On a second level, work is a religious experience in helping get beyond just acting for one's own ego. This is a collective, egalitarian dimension to labor. The ideal was intimately connected with collective living: the k'vutzah (later to be known as the kibbutz). These collective work settlements help to cement the interdependence and interrelatedness of people. What should motivate the worker is the feeling that "he and others for whom he is working are bound not solely by an economic tie, but by a spiritual, human bond. . . the

important thing for him must be not the wage he receives for his work, but the work itself . . . for this product is created to fill a vital need both physically and spiritually."¹⁰⁷

Work then becomes an offering to other people, a way to provide for others' needs as well as one's own. It becomes a selfless, charitable activity. So work relates the individual directly to Nature and work properly relates the individual to the natural collectivity: the people.

A further example of how this religious life is lived can be found in Gordon's understanding and practice of vegetarianism. It seems at first glance to be as rigorous as the more traditional Jewish dietary regulations. What Gordon sets forth is a "cosmic" or "natural" kashrut.

Gordon criticized prevalent attitudes surrounding vegetarianism. People do not take the matter as seriously as Gordon would like. "The prevailing attitude even among vegetarians, is not that of an absolute obligation or of an elementary demand, but that it is a spiritual luxury or a phase of pietistic observance."¹⁰⁸ How vegetarianism is understood and practiced is an indicator of our attitude toward life and the world. It cannot be reduced to the formula of many vegetarians, "I am a vegetarian, I do not eat meat."¹⁰⁹ Pure ethics and a cosmic perspective are really at the heart of

vegetarianism. Vegetarianism is "the ethical regard toward living creatures that is without hope of reward, or utilitarian motive."¹¹⁰

Vegetarianism is one part of an overall living relationship to all of existence. It is not a way of exploitation or violence but rather a way of regard for all living creation. It involves a heightened awareness towards animals, people and Nature. Yet most of the world still exploits Nature for profit: "Do not people cut them [trees] for the sake of money?" This way of relating to the natural world including people, Gordon calls a profanation. Vegetarianism can be a symbolic indicator of this new truer relationship to the universe, but in and of itself it might have little significance. It is however a good concrete example of how encompassing and specific Gordon's religious way can be even without a natural *שלחן ערוך*, or a codified natural guide to practice.

There is no absolute authority in Gordon's system. It seems to rely on the ethical authority that Spinoza's system relied on. For Spinoza and Gordon when one truly understands the unity and oneness of the universe one will know how to act toward other people and toward Nature.¹¹² Gordon is very aware that all people do not sense this compelling yet natural authority. Clearly most people do not sense the interdependence of all things. Gordon is idealistic yet he knows that few people

possess his vision of cosmic unity and its correlary ethical excellence: "On the whole it is difficult for us just now, under existing economic relations among men, under relations that depend on the individual, personal, national, class and sexual distinctions and not universal, human, cosmic considerations to measure fully the depth of regeneration involved in the new attitude toward living creatures."¹¹³

The task was great. It required an absolute revolution in consciousness. Gordon himself experienced the regeneration, but merely his personal communion with the Infinite was not enough, because after all, life is so interdependent that the regeneration must be total, from the individual, to the family to the nations to the community of nations.

How can this regeneration be achieved? The response is typical Gordon. It will take all of our spiritual might to seek such a new way of living, but the power of this vision will give us that spiritual strength. Gordon calls it the

מעגל קסמים --the magic circle: on the one hand, the search for a new life demands a mighty spiritual force for seeking it; on the other hand, the spiritual power required for seeking it must derive its strength from the life sought.¹¹⁴

CONCLUSION

At the end of A.D. Gordon's life he asked that only those matters of which he wrote that retained a living value be discussed and explored. He hoped his writings would have more than literary or journalistic value, that they could help regenerate life. There is definitely much that is still vital and relevant but there is also much that seems dated or just naive. When A.D. Gordon died in 1922, the Zionist dream was in its infancy still dominated by idealistic pioneers. It would be fascinating to get Gordon's reaction to contemporary developments in Israeli and Jewish life, but clearly this is not possible and so it is upon us to weigh Gordon's thought on the scales of 1982.

Much of Gordon's critique of religion and civilization is still relevant while his positive program for repairing the world has hardly been implemented. Technology and urban life have only further alienated people from the immediate life within Nature. Besides the somewhat superficial "back to nature" period of the 1970's there has been little interest in living closer to Nature. The particular Zionist return to Jewish soil also seems to be faltering in its attempt to keep collective agriculture alive. This is not to

imply that Gordon thought that the cosmic regeneration he prescribed was to sweep the world overnight.

There is still much truth in Gordon's critique of institutional religion's problems. The religious emancipation felt by Gordon and his contemporaries was new and uncertain. Religion was a primal part of their lives and even non-observance could not totally emancipate them. Many had just left traditional Judaism only to make Zionism into a new surrogate religion. Gordon was not driven by their polemics and the need to uproot and completely overturn Judaism and because of this many of his ideas about religion have resonance for the contemporary situation.

The most encompassing category in Gordon's system is religion. It is our way of relating directly with the Infinite. These encounters are not isolated but rather populate the daily lived life amidst Nature and amongst people. In a sense it seems that Gordon has recaptured the broad Biblical understanding of religion that knew fewer fixed holy times and places but rather saw every place and every moment as a potential encounter with the Infinite. Gordon's religion without walls or codes is a refreshingly expansive understanding of how fundamental and central religion must be if it is to be worth bothering about.

Gordon also takes the Infinite seriously in a time when few people outside the traditional religious

world even talk about God. God was not a problem or a question for Gordon, but a fundamental reality of his life, a reality he approached through his notion of immediate experience. His approach to the Infinite through Nature and the community offers modern Jews a way to begin their search for the Infinite. The people, for Gordon and unlike Kaplan, was not the creator of value and meaning but rather the medium through which we could expand our often self-centered lives into lives guided by a larger perspective. There was always an ethical/theological underpinning to Gordon's sense of peoplehood. This ultimate part of Gordon's teachings remains largely unexamined by the secular majority of Jews. Unlike secularists, Gordon felt that a real, vital sense of ultimate reality is the only proper focus for our ultimate concerns; not the nation, not ourselves not the good life, but what is at the root of the Universe: The Infinite.

What is very revolutionary in Gordon's thought is the centrality of Nature. Certainly within Jewish tradition there has been little regard for Nature. Mitzvoth and history are the central categories. True, within traditional Judaism there are prayers like the

יוצר אור and the מעריב ערבים that refer to the Divine role in Nature but this has hardly been a dominant theme. Nature might however be one of the most accessible areas for modern Jews to cultivate a

consciousness of an ultimate unity in creation. It is this preoccupation with Nature and natural categories that seems to place Gordon outside the pale of Jewish thought. Perhaps his preoccupation with Nature led to the neglect of his writings on religion and Nature?

It has been argued that Gordon's preoccupation with Nature leads him to lessen if not ignore the role of history in the life of Jewish people. It is not just to Nature that Gordon looks but also to the community, the people, the family of families. This collectivity has primordial bonds. We have shared memory and history. We are organically united to one another, our land, our language and our heritage. The history and experience of the Jewish people are not so much the arena for God's salvific acts or revelations as the place where our destinies merge through common experience.

The community of sentiment and memory is a counter-balance to the focus on Nature but the serious question remains as to whether this primordial Jewish community is Jewishly viable outside the land of Israel. Other than land, language, and memory what binds this people together? Gordon's categories are so universal that it seems doubtful whether his notion of cosmic religion would have any identifiably Jewish characteristics outside Israel. Gordon himself clearly did not address this problem perhaps because he felt that

people would awaken to their truer selves and return to Nature and to their land and to their natural collectivity. His universal religion remains solidly Jewish as long as it remains in Israel.

A constantly perplexing area to me and a central area to Gordon is the whole notion of labor. I have tried sympathetically to understand what Gordon meant by labor. I have tried to rationalize and explain what he meant as well. It seems clear that he felt that one needed daily contact with Nature and the sense of personal commitment to basic work. He really felt that we all should work the land, really get our hands dirty. There is no getting away from this. True, it was only part of his overall program for regenerating life but it was there and it was central. It seems very naive, to say the least, that in our technological century that we could return to a life within Nature. No matter how valuable we might regard such a life, and no matter how alienated we are from civilization such a life with Nature has proven nearly impossible even to the children of the pioneers in Israel.

The midrashic interpretations of Gordon's notion of labor are potentially endless. Many of us can agree that contemporary life has become too intellectually top heavy and that technology has contorted our life on the planet. This is not however, the same as being willing to return to Nature and work the land. What

many are willing to do is to seek a more integrated and true relationship with Nature and people beyond sheer exploitation. This vision of cosmic unity from blades of grass to warring peoples still has a prophetic quality, yet the strict adherence to farming has lost its centrality.

The other area that dates Gordon is his confidence that assimilation was really possible for Jews: "to say we cannot assimilate is sheer sophistry."¹¹⁵ He believed that religion was no longer a barrier and that "today one may live without religion."¹¹⁶ Our post-holocaust Jewish world aches when it hears such naive statements. To be a Jew was only natural for Gordon but he also granted that it was possible for any Jew to deny this part of himself and choose not to be Jewish. Gordon could not accept the Jewish question as a real and eventually tragic chapter in our people's history. Many pre-holocaust Jewish thinkers share his naivité e.g. Franz Rosenzweig, but we cannot expect them to have foreseen the great tragedy.

On a personal level the way Gordon forged his new religious path is particularly helpful. Even though some of Gordon's thought seems a bit naive, he still taught that in our quest for spiritual regeneration we cannot be overly naive. He describes how our urge for power and domination and self-interest frequently inhibit our spiritual growth. We cannot ignore these

realities and pretend to live a deep unity with all of existence. Traditional Judaism has called that part of us the **יצר הרע** and Gordon acknowledges that such an impulse is part of us. He believes we can greatly overcome that impulse by developing our intuitive, immediate way of experiencing and then live a life of expansion with Nature and community. He knew that such regeneration would be an awesome challenge but he was driven by his fundamental mystical sense of union with creation. This union gave him confidence and direction. Gordon's life and teaching in turn have given many of us both confidence and direction. He implores us to deepen ourselves in life:

A rich world lies before us, wide vistas, great depths, infinite boundless, light. Plunge people into the depths of this vast ocean. Open the chambers of your heart to these currents of light and of life. Live! live in every atom of your being! live and you will see that there is still room for love, for trust, for idealism, for creativity and perhaps, who knows, there may be worlds still undreamed of . . .!117

FOOTNOTES

1. Joseph Aaronovitch, "Impressions of His Life: A.D. Gordon," Hebrew in The Abridged Collected Writings of A.D. Gordon, ed. N. Teradyon and A. Shochet.

2. Ibid., ח עמוד.

3. Ibid., ח-ז.

4. Ibid., י-ט .

5. Ibid., ט-ח.

6. Ibid., י-ט.

7. Ibid., יב-טז.

8. Ibid., יז-כ.

9. Ibid., טז-יח.

10. Ibid., יח-יט.

11. Ibid., כב.

12. Samuel Dayan, "Gordon In D'Ganiah," in A.D. Gordon: Two Biographical Sketches, translated by Isidore J. Lapson, The Young Jew Series, Number Three (New York: Zionist Labor Party, 1930), p. 8.

13. Ibid., pp. 6-8.

14. Ibid., p. 7.

15. Ibid., p. 5.

16. Ibid., p. 9.

17. A.D. Gordon, Writings, abridged in one volume, edited by N. Teradyon and A. Schochet, Hebrew, (Tel Aviv: Shtible Press, 1936) "Man and Nature 155-214. All subsequent quotations of Gordon's writings will be from this volume and shall be referred to simply as A.D. Gordon, Writings.

18. Ibid., p. 184.

19. Ibid., p. 164.
20. Ibid., pp. 164-179.
21. Ibid., p. 168.
22. Ibid.,
23. Martin Buber, I and Thou, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970) First part: pp. 53-85.
24. A.D. Gordon, Writings, p. 172.
25. Ibid., p. 171.
26. Martin Buber, I and Thou, trans. Walter Kaufmann, especially pp. 82-85.
27. A.D. Gordon, Writings, pp. 164-179.
28. Ibid., p. 160.
29. Ibid., p. 158.
30. Ibid., pp. 173-179.
31. Ibid., p. 136.
32. Ibid., p. 142.
33. Ibid., p. 142.
34. Ibid., p. 7.
35. Ibid., pp. 169-173.
36. Ibid., p. 8.
37. Ibid., p. 69.
38. Salo Wittmayer Baron, Modern Nationalism and Religion, (New York: Meridian Books, 1960) pp. 48-55.
39. A.D. Gordon, Writings, p. 29.
40. Ibid., p. 30.
41. Ibid., p. 187.
42. Ibid., pp. 155-217 passim.
43. Ibid., p. 187.

44. Ibid., p. 186.
45. Ibid., pp. 182-186.
46. Ibid., p. 184.
47. Ibid., pp. 184-85.
48. Ibid., pp. 164-179.
49. Ibid., p. 185.
50. Ibid., p. 186.
51. Ibid., p. 187.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., p. 263.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., p. 147.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., p. 189.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid., p. 188.
60. Joachim Wach, Sociology of Religion, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1944) pp. 17-33.
61. Gordon does not make this exact statement but by emphasizing our experience of the Infinite through Nature, he implies this.
62. A.D. Gordon, Writings, p. 108.
63. Ibid., pp. 158-158:
 מקום הדבק, שבו הדבק נפש האדם הפרטי בנפש הבריאה כולה והיו
 לנפש אחת חיה; כל מה שהוא מקורי ומואר עליון בנפש האדם מה
 שקוראים: מעוף הרוח, רוח הקודש, הרי הוא נובע מחור הים
 אין-הגבולי הזה. כל מה שהאדם מחפח יותר, כל מה שהרגשותו
 והכרתו מוסיפות להחזק ולהתרחב ואוצר ידיעותיו להתעשר,
 יותר הוא זקוק לחיים בחור הטבע.
64. Ibid., p. 150.
65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., p. 188.

67. For a contemporary example of this argument:
Eugene B. Borowitz, "Beyond Immanence," Religious Education,
Vol. 75, No. 4 (July-Aug. 1980) p. 402, "In my opinion,
most American Jews believe more than they are conscious of."

68. A.D. Gordon, Writings, p. 189.

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid., p. 190.

71. Ibid., p. 168.

72. Ibid., p. 194.

73. Ibid., pp. 194-95.

74. Ibid., p. 35.

75. Ibid., p. 184.

76. Louis Jacobs, Seeker of Unity: The Life and Works of Aaron of Starosselje, (New York: Basic Books, 1966) pp. 11-12.

77. A.D. Gordon, Writings, p. 5. It is a constant problem to find a suitable translation for אומה. The term nation is a heavily embattled term in the twentieth century while simple "people" seems to omit the dimension of nationality. The term folk is also a possibility. It will be best if the reader could imagine all three English terms at each occurrence of אומה.

78. A.D. Gordon, Writings, "Human-Nation," pp. 5-26.

79. Ibid.

80. Ibid., p. 2.

81. Ibid.

82. Ibid., p. 6.

83. Ibid., p. 130.

84. Ibid., p. 93.

85. Ibid., p. 130.

86. Ibid., p. 131.

87. Ibid., p. 133.
88. Ibid., p. 134.
89. Ibid., p. 31.
90. Ibid., p. 9.
91. Ibid., pp. 187-88.
92. This is an integral component of the חיים של
התפשטות or life of expansion.
93. Ibid., p. 186.
94. Franz Rosenzweig, The Star of Redemption, trans.
William W. Hallo, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) pp. 292-93.
95. A.D. Gordon, Writings, p. 262.
96. Ibid., p. 69.
97. Ibid., p. 116.
98. Ibid., p. 263.
99. Ibid.
100. Ibid.
101. Ibid.
102. Ibid., p. 7.
103. Ibid., p. 212.
104. Ibid., p. 7.
105. Ibid., p. 197.
106. Ibid., p. 216.
107. Ibid., p. 78.
108. Ibid., p. 255.
109. Ibid.
110. Ibid., p. 256.
111. Ibid., p. 209.

112. Benedict Spinoza, Ethics, Ed. and Introduction by James Gutman, (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1953) pp. 214-217: Proposition XXXVII "The good which every one who follows after virtue seeks for himself, he will desire for other men; and his desire on their behalf will be greater in proportion as he has greater knowledge of God."

For both Gordon and Spinoza understanding the true nature of things will necessarily guide our actions toward the good. Spinoza however is a rationalist and uses reason to come to this understanding. Gordon is not a rationalist and clearly values intuitive experience above cognition as the way we can best approach the Infinite.

113. A.D. Gordon, Writings, p. 258.

114. Ibid., p. 171.

115. Ibid., p. 32.

116. Ibid.

117. Ibid., pp. 162-163.

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