The Mystical/Liberal Theology of Arthur Green

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Introduction: A Theology Liberal and Mystical

Who is Arthur Green and why study his work?

Arthur Green is the current head of the rabbinical program, and the provost at Hebrew College. He is also the former President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. He has been described as the intellectual leader of the Renewal movement[1] and is widely regarded as one of the progenitors of Neo-Hasidic theology. He is a respected scholar of Judaism, with a Ph.D. from Brandeis, and is considered a thought leader on Hasidic and kabbalistic subjects throughout the academic world. He is a Jewish Theological Seminary-ordained student of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and the author of a dozen books and numerous articles.[2]

But it is not just Green's intellectual pedigree that makes him worthy of study. Simply put, Green has accomplished something rich and deep. He has created a Jewish theology that is equal parts liberal and mystical. This theology, as studied here, can be found in Green's three primary theological texts: *Seek my Face, Ehyeh a Kabbalah for Tomorrow,* and *Radical Judaism.*

Green's theology is deeply spiritual, both because it is concerned with the inner journey of the individual and because his universalism taps into the many of the tropes associated with this term. For instance he speaks about energy,[3] attempts to tie natural and scientific phenomena into the greater order of the universe,[4] and contests the notion of any single tradition having a primary claim to an ultimate truth. While acknowledging that his

1 Daniel Landes, "Hidden Master," Jewish Review of Books, Fall 2010, https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/118/hidden-master/.

2 Rabbi Arthur Green," Hebrew College: Jewish Learning and Leadership for a Pluralistic World, accessed October 29, 2017, http://www.hebrewcollege.edu/arthur-green.

3 Arthur Green, *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow* (Woodstock, Vt: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003), 149.

4 Green, *Ehyeh*, 149.

work is specifically targeted toward Jews.[5] In the tradition of many spiritual masters, Green welcomes his readers on a spiritual journey with him and simultaneously, humbly, dismisses his own worthiness to delve into the secret meaning of the universe.

Nevertheless delve Green does, and though his writing contains many of the trappings of universalistic spirituality- the topics that Green discusses are unmistakably Jewish. Following in the tradition of many Jewish theologians, Torah, God, and Israel remain the classic core in Green's text *Radical Judaism*. Creation, revelation, redemption and the many secret names of God are littered throughout *Seek My Face.* Likewise, as its title suggests, *EHYEH, A Kabbalah for Tomorrow* is brimming with reinterpretations of Kabbalah, aligning mystical teachings with the challenges of modernity.

While Green's endeavor may seem simple on the surface, what Green crafts here is a unique and balanced mixture of two competing traditions, Jewish particularism and mystical universalism. To strike this balance, Green must be cautious. On the one hand, it would be all too easy for him to fall into apologetics, taking the secretive patriarchal traditions of Kabbalah and the Zohar and attempting to "update" them to fit with modern Western sensibilities. Conversely, he could abandon anything beyond a superficial connection to Judaism and create a series of texts which explain how Western beliefs and sensibilities were always found within the teachings of Jewish mystics. It is a testament to Green's ethos that he does neither of these things. Instead, he openly inserts himself into the Jewish chain of transmission and claims the authority to interpret and alter a previous understanding of the text. This authority is based on, but not bound by, the power of his scholarship and his spiritual beliefs. His is a theology that is deeply personal and is rooted in his postmodernist

5 Green, *Ehyeh*, ix. Arthur Green, *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition*, Franz Rosenzweig Lecture Series (New Haven [Conn.] ; London: Yale University Press, 2010), 7.

historical perspective and exposure to a religion which could not fulfill his spiritual longings.[6]

This is a theology that, from the onset, makes no claims to be aligned with a Hasidic, Orthodox, or even classically mystical interpretations of God[7]. Green defines his theology as panentheistic and mystical,[8] and he asserts his claims from both perspectives. This identity, composed of panentheism and mysticism, is consistent throughout his works, even before he came to identify it by such a name. There can be no doubt that Green is trying to express the degree of God's majesty throughout his texts, and his effort to explain the indescribable is a classic one.

It would be a great disservice to Green's body of work to try to articulate it in a single sentence, and I will not attempt to do so. I also will not claim a full understanding of how Green -a living author- means to portray of God in these three books. This is because, as I have mentioned, Green is a prolific writer and there is the distinct possibility that he will write something new, speak with those at his school, or publish a piece that falls outside of my interpretation of his teachings. Instead this thesis represents a personal journey through Green's work and seeks to create three individual, yet intertwined, chapters on Green's theology. They are a way for me, as a future rabbi, to teach the lessons of one of the great liberal Jewish thinkers of this era.

In the first chapter I examine Green's conception of God, the role of "inner discovery", the goal of encountering the divine, and Green's use of the term "panentheism". In the second chapter I study Green's understanding of the role of the different religions,

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6 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 1.

7 When reviewing *Radical Judaism* for the *Jewish Review of Books,* Daniel Landes claimed that Green's thoughts were more closely aligned with the works of Mordechai Kaplan than the hasidic Green claimed as inspiration. "I am amused that Landes finds Kaplan to be my "hidden master" at this late point in my career. Where was he when I could have used him to shore up my Kaplanian credentials?" Green responded. While Green may not see much of Kaplan in his work, there are certainly pieces which seem to resonate with Reconstructionist thought, namely that the traditional concept of "chosenness" is invisible in Green's work.

8 The belief or doctrine that God is greater than the universe and includes and interpenetrates it.

divine unification, and the mystical teachings which undergirds all reality. In the third chapter, I analyze Green's understanding of the revelation of Torah , the eternity of Sinai, and the meaning of the Covenant. Finally, I conclude with an examination of my own journey through rabbinical school, at HUC-JIR, and the impact that Green's lessons and theology have had on my personal Jewish practice and perspective.

Chapter 1: The Spiritual Quest

The Language of Love is a way in which Soul and Mind can address one another, each calling the other along to the great Journey. "Deep calls to Deep. (Ps. 42.8)", to say it in the language of the midrash; one aspect of human depths calls out ot the other. This same phrase, "Deep calls unto Deep," also offers us a hint as to how a contemporary understanding might view the old struggle between vertical and internal religious language. We would see both of them as aspects of consciousness, the highly complex human mind pushing and churning within itself to attain a higher grasp of being, both in its oneness and its its infinite complexity.

-Arthur Green, Radical Judaism

Where can one find God? One of Green's early arguments in *Seek my Face* is about reorienting the human expectation of encountering the divine. According to much traditional wisdom God lives very high above humanity, either literally in the sky or in a realm beyond it.[9] This idea of a heavenward God is a vestige of early sky worship which, Green suggests, humans have never truly outgrown.[10] In this vein the heavens, in Western culture, are synonymous with the idea of an abode for God or an adjacent spiritual domain for blessed souls. They are an "upper" realm and are eternally and impossibly distant. Certain toraitic passages which portray God as living far above all creation, like Jacob's ladder in Genesis, reinforce this idea. The ladder of this narrative possess a supernatural height, and the Angels in the story ascend it to travel between our world and the supernal world, which reinforces how impossibly distant these two worlds are from each other. In another biblical narrative, in Exodus 20, Moses similarly ascends "upwards" at mount Sinai. Although he is tethered to the Mountain, he ascends so high that he is lost into the smoking clouds. Adding to to the mystical, vertical dimension of this narrative, there are many midrashic and mystical

9 Arthur Green, *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology*, 2nd ed. (Woodstock, Vt: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003), 8.

10 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 34.

understandings of that suggest that the top of the mountain is not a fully physical location. According to such texts, it straddles the barrier between heaven and earth, a path for the heavenly Torah to be transferred to the material world. This was a moment which could not have existed fully on earth since it was, fundamentally, a moment when the infinite touched creation. Thus, even Sinai, the moment when God manifested *inside* of material creation, is ostensibly a "heavenly" moment.

According to Green, the Israelite deity began as a God who dwelled in a castle beyond the "second waters" on the other end of the sky, and this perception of God later developed in early christian and Jewish thought.

> "Christianity inherited this belief from the Scripture it calls the Old Testament; the risen Christ was depicted as dwelling 'in heaven'... The Rabbis and the earliest Jewish mystics, restricted to verbal descriptions, spoke also of God residing in the 'seventh heaven' and of arduous heavenly journeys to reach the divine throne room."[11]

Merkavah literature, the mystical literature of the early Rabbis who envisioned the great palaces of God and their (The Rabbis) journeys within them, also expounds this belief. The early Rabbis who produced this literature suggest in it that the the heavenly palaces exist both within the visions of the Rabbis who journey through them, and as a transcendent physical reality, and in their mystical texts, the Rabbis portray and the soul's journey into the heavenly palaces as an ascent. Altogether this image of God above is so ingrained in Jewish and Christian cultural conceptions of God that, as Green points out, were you to ask a child to point to where God lives, the most common direction to which they point would be up.

Unlike the above beliefs, Green's theology is in tension with vertically oriented theologies and thus request that these ideal be reconsidered. This is because whenever one

11 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 34.

uses "heaven" language they are using a "*vertical metaphor for an inward event,"*[12] (the "event" being an interaction with the Divine). According to Green, one does not encounter God at the top of a mountain or at the great heights, but instead the spiritual encounter is an inner encounter. He argues that seekers need to stop thinking about the Divine in vertical terms, sky palaces and impossible distances, and start thinking of a God within themselves. Green points out that the Jewish tradition is already aware of this need and that the Torah itself declares as much in Deuteronomy 30:12-14: "Who will go up to the heavens to fetch it and bring it to us? Nor is it over the sea… but it is very close to you[13], within your own mouths and hearts to be fulfilled". While the Bible may have recognized the possibility of divine encounter at the high places, there are also biblical passages that appear aware of the internal element of mystical experiences.

Green argues for a different metaphor than the heavenly abode, instead proposing the concept of Abraham's well. "Suppose we try to reach for the understanding that flowed as water from the depths of Abraham's well, rather, for the moment, than the one that came down from the top of Moses's mountain."[14] The digging of wells brings to mind thoughts of hard labor, burrowing downwards, the exhuming of layers of earth, and finally the discovery of water. Water, classically associated with Torah, is in this model the goal of our spiritual digging. Green prefers this metaphor writing that:

> "This journey inward would be one that peels off layer after layer of externals, striving ever for the inward truth, rather than one that consists of climbing rung after rung, reaching ever higher and higher. Spiritual growth, in this metaphor, is a matter

12 Green, *Seek My Face*, 9.

13 The text here is speaking about Torah, though Green extends the metaphor outwards to God. For Green, Torah is the primary method by which Jews are capable of being in relationship with the divine. As a result, the lines between the two (which lines) might be less solid for him than they are for others. See chapter 3 for an extended discussion on Green's view of Torah as a relationship between the Israelites and God.

14 Green, *Seek My Face*, 9.

of uncovering new *depths* rather than attaining new *heights*."[15]

What are the advantages of this alternative model ? Green asserts that by changing the metaphor, one can make a fundamental change towards establishing a meaningful prayer practice. By empowering the individual, to look inward and make self-discoveries, rather than to petition and receive, ones strengthens his or her ability to be an active partner with the Deity. To this effect, Green highlights a line from Exodus 25:8, "make a Tabernacle that I may dwell within them" and suggests that one must read this literally. He argues that one should make a goal of his or her spiritual practice the hosting of the Divine. While the God who dwells in heaven cannot dwell within you, a child of flesh and blood and bound to earth, there is a way to fulfill these ancient words; by turning inwards.[16]

What does this mean in practice? Green describes the prayer of a Hasid who is engaged in this work of introspection thusly: The hypothetical Hasid, running behind in his obligatory daily prayers and in the middle of Grand Central Station, self-consciously stops to *daven* in a phone booth with the pay phone in his hand;

> "He walks over to the phones, picks one up, and starts to recite his prayers. He begins to pray: "Happy are those who dwell in Your House; they shall forever praise you"
>
> At that moment the great station is God's house, and the Hasids prayer may be deeply from the heart. It should not be judged by the too-simple question: "Is there anybody on the other end of the line?" The relationship between the one who pray and the one who receives prayer is not that of two ends of the telephone."[17]

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15 Green, *Seek My Face*, 9.

16 As I explain later, Green's God is found inside of all living things but has no physical form of its own. How this works with Greens universalism, and opinion about Christian belief, is not a question I can answer at this time.

17 Green, *Ehyeh*, 155.

Although Green does not directly link his description of Abraham's well and the Hasid in Grand Central; the theology of the inner search is evident in this second example. In a traditional skyward-looking mentality that timeless question "Am I heard?" goes often unanswered. Heavenly conversation is based on an assumption of connection, that humanity will reach up and the divine will reach down, since otherwise there can be no possible meeting of the two.

However, if one follows Hasid analogy as an example of inward prayer, it becomes possible to imagine a new way of relating to the divine within. The Hasid picks up the "phone" and instead of looking towards an impossible distance, looks inside. He asks himself "Where is God?" and may answer that "God is everywhere *but* impossibly far away." God is in the Hasid, in the phone booth with him, across the hall, and in the trains that are zooming away from the station at top speed. Because the Hasid is capable of looking inwards and feeling connected to the divine, he can project that sensation of connection outwards to the rest of existence. In Green's words;

> "In prayer we give voice to the deepest self that lies hidden within us, the spark of divinity that lies within our soul. That innermost spark, like the highest, primordial Torah, dwells in a realm far beyond words. We give it the gift of language, allowing it to come forth and be present to the world of our conscious selves."[18]

One could ask: Could the Hasid have made this spiritual connection within a vertical theology? Of course! But the distance inherent to such a belief system is a barrier that he must overcome. Additionally, even though the distance between the infinite and the finite (as is the distance between the Divine and humanity) will always be an issue. The spiritual practice of *devekut,* of clinging to God, is an attempt to reduce that distance for the innermost

18 Green, *Ehyeh*, 155.

spark, the divine light which resides within humanity, which does indeed "dwell in a realm far beyond words."[19] Green points out in the analogy above, it is not easy to reach this spark. However when Green claims that the divine spark is inside of each person, instead of in the highest of heavens, the journey that the individual needs to make in order to reach it changes on a fundamental level. Green explains that:

> "Inwardness means that the One is to be found within all beings. We find God through a turning into ourselves to be sure, but also through the inward experiences that we share with others. The inner sight that we develop in such moments then leads us to an ability to see the inwardness of all creatures, to come to know them as the many faces of the one."[20]

An inward theology, therefore, leads not only to a greater spiritual growth or a stronger prayer practice, both activities which focus on the individual's journey. Inward theology begins with insights about the self but leads to recognizing the divine within the other. This full understanding of inward theology is a key towards understanding God's presence in this world, present not only inside of the seeker, but inside of his or her neighbor as well. What is being argued here, at first, appears to be a contradiction. How can it be that by looking for God inside oneself, he or she can find God inside of others? If one is doing the spiritual well-digging, and if one is looking for "inner waters", how can the personal quest for self-transformation lead to gazing at the "other" and seeing God? Green is aware of this tension and makes steps to avoid a theology that could fall into a trap of narcissism. He does so by stressing the importance of "we" and "other" and he suggests that "The lone core of the quest does not mean that we are pursue it in isolation. Judaism, including Kabbalah, has

19 Green, *Ehyeh*, 155.

20 Green, *Seek My Face*, 10.

always been a path that leads to the creation of community, ideally a setting for shared exploration and mutual strengthening by fellow seekers along the way."[21] Thus, according to Green, sacred community is a companion to the inner journey, not an obstacle to it.

How, then, should one define an inward-looking sacred community? Green looks backwards to Sinai in search of a model for sacred community. However, interestingly, Green suggests that the Israelites at Sinai were split into two distinct communities rather than one. The first of the two was the vast, sprawling community of Jews which had left Egypt. It" was was at the base of the mountain , a very large group of Jews... all joined together. They stopped fighting, stopped calling each other names… We stood at the base of the mountain, so we are told. "like a single person, with a single heart.""[22] This is the traditional image of the Israelites at Sinai, a great assembly of unified people who were looking, upward, toward the smoking mountain. The focus of this image is on unity: unity of spirit, purpose, and identity. There were different types of people at Sinai, different tribes, but they were unified by a shared experience of the divine.

Who comprises the second community? According to Green, Moses. Moses, ascending the mountain and travelling into heaven is a community unto himself. "Moses [ascended the mountain] not just as an individual. He was a *neshamah kelalit*, an all encompassing 'oversoul,' one whose soul embraced and held within it all the souls of Israel...Moses had a soul that included everyone. We therefore were not only at the base of the mountain, but at its top. We were there in the soul of Moses as he entered the heavens."[23] What Green means to convey in saything that Moses as the carrier for all Israel[24] is the

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21 Green, *Ehyeh*, 166.

22 Green, *Ehyeh*, 169.

23 Green, *Ehyeh*, 169.

24 The fact that Moses goes up to heaven does not prevent this scene from serving as a model for an inward-facing spiritual moment. When discussing the difference between upper/skyward vs. inner spirituality, it is not the language of

capability of an individual to carry a greater spiritual experience from within oneself. Not only be knowing the self, but by setting that experience as possible for everyone else in sacred community.

Inward spiritual journeys are what allows those who are not Moses to attempt, like him, to create spiritual unity. This is why an inward-facing theology cannot function in a self-serving or egoist fashion. The practice of revealing inner an strength and connection to God, by its very nature, connects one to others, and people achieve a level of spiritual unity by understanding themselves and applying that understanding outwards. This is accomplished by the transformative action of making oneself into a dwelling place for holiness.

While the radical reimagining of theology described above may be appealing in theory, in practice it may be challenging for individuals to adopt. One cannot merely decide "Yes, this is how I am going to envision God now." The Jewish tradition has source material that can facilitate this kind of inward thinking, but it is impossible to ignore the prominent thread of skyward/upper discourse as being central to certain Jewish understandings of the deity. Consequently, there is a process that seekers must use to adtop Green's theology. The process of beginning this kind of spiritual quest is central to Green's first theological text, *Seek my Face,* wherein he describes this search as being about understanding God by understanding the name of the Deity. Green is not the first scholar or mystic to believe that by knowing God's name one can understand the deity, but his approach will ultimately take him to a very different place.

According to Green's theology, to find God within and infuse a sacred community with a theology of inwardness, one needs to seek the name of God. Green approaches the tetragrammaton through an understanding of its *pshat* grammatical form:

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heaven-facing and inwardness that solely defines such matters.

> "It is to be read as an impossible construction of the verb 'to be.' *HaYaH*- that which was - *HoWeH* - that which is- and *YiHYeH*- that which will be - are all forced together in a grammatically impossible conflation. Y-H-W-H is a verb that has been artificially arrested in motion and made to function as a noun….The elusiveness [of defining God] is underscored by the fact that all the letters that make up this name serve in ancient Hebrew interchangeably as consonants and as vowels. As vowels they are mere breath; there is nothing hard or defined in their sound."[25]

Green grasps at the fundamentally majestic impossibility of God that is reflected in God's very name. A being that transcends time and space, a name that cannot be pronounced for it is not a real word, and yet at the same time the meaning of the word captures all that has ever been and will ever be. "The most abstract of words, that which encompases being and becoming within it, is also the name by which that ever-elusive One is called." [26] God, whose secret nature can only be known through this chosen name of Y-H-W-H, has chosen that same name to be an unknowable paradox.

Why should the name of God be so elusive?[27] After all, the ability to invoke God by name is what allows supplicative prayer to occur at all within a Jewish context: How else could the petition know the subject of their devotions? Green seeks to answer this question in part, by point out that names can possess a magical or theological power. Thus, Jews guard the name of God, literally replacing it and creating alternatives for its enunciation out of zeal for its special power. This alteration of God's name serves to amplify the moment when

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25 Green, *Seek My Face*, 16–17.

26 Green, *Seek My Face*, 20.

27 The focus on the name of God is not limited to Green. It is also a focus in the work of mystics, liturgists, midrash, and the Deuteronomical author. Green credits his predecessors in his footnotes on page 198 of Seek my Face. He specifically quotes Ephraim Urbach's *The Sages* as a source for greater learning on this discussion. As he explains there, and in his book *Eheye,* the names of God are viewed by the Kabbalists as hints to the existence and interactions of the *sefiroth*.

God's true name ultimately is uttered. These four letters, strung together in an impossible-to-pronounce way, contain a special link to the unknowable. An ability to connect with God's actual name is of course, important: How else would one address their inner dreams and desires to their Deity? Calling out in faithful prayer requires access to a name (or at the very least a belief that something exists which can hear prayers and respond to them). How long can a person call out to an entity, or how deeply into his or her prayers can one dig, without giving the recipient a name? The ability of humans to be in relationship with the "other" is fundamentally enhanced by the knowledge of its name. As Green describes the phenomenon

> "The one named, at least in our experience within the human interpersonal realm, steps forth from anonymity and becomes fully human. How much harder it is to do violence to another or to dehumanize that person once he or she has a name! To call a person by name is to recognize that person's humanity."[28]

In the same vein as Green, we can ask: Would one go to seek a being without knowing the identity of what he or she seeks? To that end, it is reasonable to recognize that to know the name of a thing means that one can have a personal relationship with it.

It is possible that Green focuses on the importance of knowing God's name because he does not believe in a "traditional" notion of God. "I simply do not." He writes, "encounter God as 'He' is usually described in the Western religious context, a Supreme Being or Creator who exists outside or beyond the universe, who created this world as an act of personal will, and who guides and protects it."[29] Green notes early in *Radical Judaism* that his earlier exposures to the traditional notion of the God of Israel left him cold and

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28 Green, *Seek My Face*, 20-21.

29 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 2.

uninspired. Green's unique life experience- he was born in the generation which immediately followed the Holocaust, struggled with the childhood death of his mother, and was exposed to the formal and scientific scholarship of the Bible- left him searching for something else, something that he would describe as sacred (and what I would describe as the mystical experience.) Green, echoing his teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel, describes what he was searching for in sacredness:

> "The sacred" refers to an inward, mysterious sense of awesome presence, a reality deeper than the kind we ordinarily experience. Life bears within it the possibility of inner transcendence; the moments when we glimpseof it are so rare and powerful that they call upon us to transform the rest of our lives in their wake. These moments can come without warning, though they may be evoked by great beauty, by joy, by terror, or by anything else that causes us to stop and interrupt our ordinary all-encompassing and yet essentially superficial perception of reality. When that *mask of ordinariness* falls away, our consciousness is left with a moment of nakedness, a confrontation with a reality that we do not know how to put into language. The astonishment of such moments, that which my most revered teacher[30] termed "radical amazement", is the starting point of my religious life.[31]

Green uses the words of his teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, to redefine the inner search for the divine. What may trigger a moment of sacred, mystical revelation remains unknowable, but when such a moment happens, it is accompanied by a sense of deep intimacy. This intimacy is not necessarily the passionate intimacy of a lover, but rather the intimacy of revelation and recognition, defined by the reality that something incredible has

[30] Abraham Joshua Heschel

[31] Green, *Radical Judaism*, 4.

happened, is happening, and continues to happen even when we are not aware of it.

One could argue that it is not the intimacy that accompanies the sensation of mystical revelation, but rather the intimacy with the divine that allows us to engage with these moments. Put differently, humanity always is experiencing divinity but realizes it only rarely. Thus, the divine encounter should not be the goal of the search, because the divine encounter is ongoing and always happening. Instead, seekers should attempt to realize, to sense and acknowledge, the divine encounter which which they are already a part of. The sensation of realization, therefore, is the means to a deeper understanding.

This is why a full understanding of the paradoxical name of God is so important. Intimacy- recognizing the divine in the world and being in relationship with God- is not a temporal goal that one should seek. It is not an ephemeral quest for today, or tomorrow, or for a mere passing moment; instead, it is an equilibrium that all should strive towards. Similarly, God's name is not a thing that exists at any one moment in time, but it is a statement of future, past, and present. It hints at the nature of the encounter with the divine, which is always occurring but only recognizable through spiritual practice. This theology requires constant intentionality and awareness and it recognizes a metaphysical truth that Green calls panentheism. Green describes this as a realization that God is invested in all things, is greater than all things, and is recognizable as and in the sacred. He writes:

> For me God is not an intellectual proposition but rather the ground of life itself. It is the name I give to the reality I encounter in the kind of moment I have been describing, one that feels more authentic and deeply perceptive of the truth than any other. I believe with complete faith that every human being is capable of such an experience.… Through the profound echo chamber of countless generations, tradition offers a way to respond, to channel the love and awe that rise up within us at such

times, and to give a name to the holy mystery by which our lives are bounded.[32]

As Green makes clear in the final sentence of this passage, the religious tradition is one method by which *humanity,* as a group, can push towards a shared awareness of an ever-occurring divine encounter. Thus, Green's theology returns to looking inward for the name and face of God, specifically toward our understanding of love. Why love? Perhaps because it is only through something uncontrollable and inexplicable that one can recognize something else, so great and so grand, that it defies every attempt at definition.

Green asserts that it is impossible for one to successfully realize the encounter with God without projecting human forms and understandings onto the infinite. In his words: "because we feel the relationship with God as one of deep intimacy, we cannot help but depict it in images of the sorts of human intimacy that we know best: God as spouse, God as our parent, God as our loving friend."[33] When one enters into a relationship with another human being, he or she learns to reveal and open himself- or herself to them. At times, they learn to see what they love of their romantic partners in themselves, and what they love of themselves in their partners. When one is truly intimate with another it can feel as if two single units are blending into unity.[34]

Green says that the ability to encounter God through the actions of others and through personal imagery both result from the Torah's shocking declaration that humans are created in the image of God. Consequentially, human beings, each one, are divine vessels for the sacred energy and potential which infuses creation. This is another reason why sacred community is possible, even necessary, when engaging on an inward spiritual search. When

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32 Green, *Radical Judaism 5-6.*

33 Green, *Seek My Face*, 24.

34 In chapter 2 I will explore the idea of divine unification in far greater detail.

people are isolated from others they are also isolated from other repositories of the divine (i.e., other human beings), and their ability to be aware of God's presence is weakened. Green quoted his teacher as conveying this idea in the following way: “Abraham Joshua Heschel used to teach that the reason graven images are forbidden by the Torah is not because God has no image, but because God has just one image: that of every living, breathing human being. You may not fashion an image of God in any medium other than that of your entire life- that is the message of the Torah.” [35]

One final concept worth exploring before concluding this chapter is Green's notion of the divine face. Portraying or imagining the image of the face of God is a notion that many post-maimonidean Jews find uncomfortable. The Judaism that modern Jews have inherited is deeply tied to a God who remains eternally incorporeal and non-anthropomorphized, and therefore many modern Jews may feel that they have no choice but to read and understand texts about the face of God as metaphors of the highest level. Nevertheless, it is clear that Jewish tradition, specifically the *Tanach* when read as *pshat*, has not always presented God’s face in this way. The priestly benediction, for instance, invokes the face of God to shine upon those worthy of its blessing.[36] Further, it is said that Moses alone was worthy of communicating with the divine in this unique and intimate way, *panim al panim*- face to face [37]. In texts from the biblical canon beyond the Torah, Green points out that the psalms are full of poets who cry out with a desperate desire to see the beauty of God.[38] These examples notwithstanding, there are clearly sources in the bible that believe in an aniconic God; Moses himself is told that he will not be able to perceive the face of God, lest he die, and that this is

35 Green, *Seek My Face*, 27.

36 Numbers 6:23-27

37 Exodus 33:11

38 Green, *Seek My Face*, 28.

the fate of all men who would see the divine.[39]

> Green, though, is perfectly comfortable asking questions about the literal face of God. "It is we who take the mysterious and faceless One of the universe and make it into a human like deity. That is our need and our right. God would have no face if we did not ascribe a face to God. But what face is it that we ascribe to the One? Does each of us lend to God his or her own face? Is it the multiple faces of those we love in our lifetime that we collectively project onto God?"[40]

It is natural to project a face, and more, onto the divine, Green argues. He suggests that humanity cannot exist with be in a relationship with a faceless God. I would subtly modify his argument and say that humanity cannot in relationship with God *and aware of such a relationship* without imagining God's face.It is not novel to argue that humans relate more closely with others, and that intimacy is more possible, when they know a person face to face. The intimacy that comes from a face-to-face divine relationship, and this projection of human needs onto God, can change depending on a person's needs at a give time. In the course of Human experiences, there are moments when God may look like a young and beautiful lover, a strong warrior, or a righteous ruler and judge, and a static image of God would be ill-equipped to meet the needs of all possible situations. At times Jews have needed God to be the merciful keeper of souls, and at others Jews have begged God to wage war on their behalf. How strange it would be if God had the same face for both roles! It should not be surprising that that when people perceive God, their perception is tailored to fit the needs of their situation. Even if God is not different in these situations, humans, and what they project onto God, are.

Green continues:"We are created in the image of God, if you will, and we are obliged

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[39] Exodus 33:18

[40] Green, *Seek My Face*, 29.

to return the favor. God seeks to make us become ever more holy; we seek to make God human. The divine voice deep within us... calls upon us to reshape our lives as embodiments of divinity."[41] How then does one perceive the face of God? As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, humanity has an innate tendency to looks to the heavens and wait for divinity to descend. However, this is an act which masks Gods face, because it keeps God distant from creation. Instead, one ought to look inward in search of God, to search for the God present in humanity. As Green concludes "so the face is our gift to God."[42]

Let us summarize the first lesson and to reiterate certain points which will continue to be important: To Begin God is always encountering humanity even though humans are not always aware of this encounter. Further the name of God (Y-H-W-H) hints at this truth in its affirmation of God as an ever-unfolding Deity who simultaneously is happening, has happened, and will happen again. Humanity's inner journey and spiritual quest is founded on realizing this truth. To enable perception of the encounter with God, humanity needs to stop looking towards an impossible distance and waiting for blessing to descend. Instead, people should work towards realizing that God is so vast that divinity and sacredness infuse (and exceed) creation, a theology that Green calls panentheism. This divine infusion extends to humanity as well, which God created in God's own divine image. Finally, it is possible to encounter the sacred by looking inward and engaging in spiritual well-digging, by acknowledging the divine form of other people, by living in sacred community, and by working to see the face of the divine that is present in all people.

41 Green, *Seek My Face*, 31.

42 Green, *Seek My Face*, 31.

Chapter 2: All is One

> *The "foundation of all the mystical formulations in the world" is the realization that God is everywhere, indeed that nothing but God exists. That leads us to the great question of mysticism, asked in one form or another in each of the mystical traditions. "Why is that we do not experience the world this way?" If God is all, why do separations and distinctions between one thing and another, especially the basic separations between self and Other, God and world, seem to be real? If the mystic's unitive vision does represent reality, what is the relationship between that truth and the multifaceted, differentiated world in which we seem to live?*
>
> *-Art Green, Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow*

As mentioned in the introduction, Green is considered one of the leading minds in the Renewal movement. The other founder of Jewish Renewal was Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi, or simply "Reb Zalman."[43] Green and Zalman were friends and contemporaries, and in 2001 they met in Zalman's home in Boulder Colorado to discuss matters of spirituality.[44] Reb Zalman opened their discussion by asking a simple question: "Is the earth alive?" From there he expanded and expounded on the "ecumenical"[45] theology that he was noted for. Zalman described his desire, and need, to be connected to the God he identifies as *Melelch Ha'Olam,* the Ruler of the World. This phrase, according to Zalman, is related to a deity that is rooted in the world humans experience, one who is more accessible and relatable than the cosmic timeless and eternal force that one might recognize as the *Melelch L'Olam* or Eternal Ruler. Zalman seemingly views the *Melech Ha'Olam* as the planetary consciousness of a greater organism that we call at once God, Earth, and in Zalman's terminology, a "Gaian God". From there, he makes a powerful claim: that the various religions of humanity should

[43] As such I will refer to him throughout as Zalman or Reb Zalman.

[44] Arthur Green and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, "Thinking through the Metaphors of Deep Ecumenism: A Dialogue," Delumin/a – Spirituality, Culture, and Arts, November 19, 2014, http://delumina.net/blog/2014/11/19/thinking-through-the-metaphors-of-deep-ecumenism.

[45] Here the term ecumenical is used to describe the global sense of bringing all religions together into a sense of greater understanding, rather than in its stricter use in inter-Christian dialogue.

each be thought of as the different vital organs of this greater being. Each religion, in such a metaphor, is important, and each each adds to the greater health of the world/God. When one religions becomes sick, damaged or lost, it is a loss and a pain to the greater functioning of this super-organism or Universal Mind. As he puts it: "If you have only one kidney, you can still do quite a lot. Even without a gallbladder, you can still survive. That is true. But, I still feel that there is a contribution that gets lost."[46]

The next question that Zalman asked the group was the following: If the world is alive, and the world is God, then how does this world want to be addressed? Like Green in my first chapter, Zalman is in favor of projection onto and metaphorization of God. Even a God which is as close as the physical, corporeal world, is still too much for limited human consciousness to understand:

> It needs personas *(partzufim),* metaphors, and forms through which we can get to the uniqueness of the Universal Mind, and these are what we find in the different religious traditions. If it appears as a woman, looking like Mary, the mother of Jesus, we might not feel that this is appropriate for us as Jews. But how should the Divine Presence *(Shekhinah)* appear to the imagination? We need to have it in a form that the heart can recognize.[47]

Zalman takes a question which I spoke about previously, what does the face of God look like, and makes it universally inclusive. When one imagines the comforting feminine form of the divine encounter, what he or she sees may be shaped by his or her religious background: a Christian may see their version of the Virgin Mary while a Jew might envision the *shekhinah*. In this way, both are correct, both are true, and while neither are "triumphant" in its claims

46 Green and Schachter-Shalomi, "Thinking through the Metaphors of Deep Ecumenism."

47 Green and Schachter-Shalomi, "Thinking through the Metaphors of Deep Ecumenism."

because all of these understandings simply are human projections of the great "organs" which propel the super-organism which is God.

> Green responds to Reb Zalman's ecumenical ideas as follows:
>
> We are very close on this issue, though I think I want the religions to be seen as 'garments' *(levushim)* rather than 'organs,' because I want to say that "the One is one and whole in itself." It is seen in different vessels as It addresses Itself to different civilizations. Garments clothe the body, but organs are part of the body, dividing God, as it were.
>
> I think every mountain, every tree, and every flower is a garment *(levush)* for the One. We believe in biological diversity, in cultural diversity, and spiritual diversity, because the planet needs to recover the spiritual truth that has been lost in the modern world. And for this healing, we need to preserve all the diversity we can; but I think I am still more comfortable with the language of garments than the organism.[48]

Green seems torn here between his desire to agree with Zalman on the universality of beings and his desire to preserve a theology of separateness and uniqueness. However, his idea of separateness is not about a separation of religions, as one might first think, but a separation between the One and the "garments" that clothe it. God is the One here, the being who is clothed, and all creations are garments that serve to beautify and clothe God. While there is certainly some essence of the wearer reflected in their garment- in that garments are a reflection of the one who wears them- there is still a fundamental difference between what one *is* and what he or she *wears*. That is to say, Green is far more comfortable than Zalman with drawing a distinction between the actual essence of the divine and human interpretations

48 Green and Schachter-Shalomi, "Thinking through the Metaphors of Deep Ecumenism."

thereof.

Green continues, discussing how various religions are manifestation of various encounters with the divine:

> There is the One Universal Being, a line of life present in all things, undergoing the whole evolutionary process, struggling to manifest itself, seeking to be known. It is a Creature seeking a garment for Itself, one which can ultimately have self-awareness, that can ultimately stretch its mind to be aware of this greater Whole. This One Brain manifesting all of our brains, manifesting all of our cultures, needs of us, calls upon us, to know It, to recognize It. And we, as people and cultures, then create all the forms. We create all the forms through which It is known, whether those forms are the Eucharist, the *shalosh regalim,* the chakras, the language of metaphysicians, or the language of Buddhist angelology; whatever these forms are, we create them. We create them in response to an inner call from the One, which says, "Know Me!"[49]

Green's response on organs versus garments tells us much about what he considers the importance of personal action in his theology.[50] It is enough for Zalman that humanity is part of this great being, by whatever name it is known and by whatever identity humanity projects onto it, but for Green the vital charge of the divine/human relationship is that humanity respond to the divine call. Both are comfortable claiming that all religions are in relationship with the divine, that sacred moments are happening and happen to people of all backgrounds and faith, but in Green's theology there is a fundamental sacredness to the call

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49 Green and Schachter-Shalomi, "Thinking through the Metaphors of Deep Ecumenism."

50 In Ehyeh (What about Evil) Green speaks about the problem of Evil and whether or not God is also responsible for our evil actions. Are they too garments of the One? Green argues there that the energy which composes all life can appear in animals as aggression. In humanity it can overstep this limitation and become evil. Green differentiates therein between suffering and evil, with evil requiring a will and a cruel method to its actions. He concludes that God too is obligated in acts of *teshuvah*, and like us requires a partner to actualize repentance.

and the answer, which defines that encounter. As Green states to push back against Zalman "If you say, "organs," you are making them more *part* of the One, rather than the human response to that inner call, and this is why I still prefer 'garments' to 'organs.'[51] At the root of this disagreement between Reb Zalman and Green is the question of whether or not God is equivalent to the world. For Zalman God and the world are one, but Green views God as both part of the world and greater than it.

Reb Zalman and Green's conversations revolves around one of the primary mystical "formulations" that Green alludes to throughout his work, namely that all is God or that there is only One. As Green puts it in *Ehyeh* "all multiplicity of beings and their sense of separateness or distance from one another are either illusion or represent a less than ultimate truth. This is especially the case, in the language of Western mysticism, in the great alienation or sense of distance that humans feel between themselves and God."[52] Throughout the first chapter of this thesis, I alluded to a variation of this lesson: the idea that humanity is always encountering the divine. However as I delve further into the mystical lessons of divine unification it will become clear that this is not the full truth. The reality is that this theology does not merely reflect a belief, that humanity is always encountering the divine, but rather that there is nothing but the divine to encounter.

This mystical concept is one of the first teachings that Green offers in *Seek my Face.* For Green, even the "watchwords of our faith", the *Shema*, are a statement of this truth. What does it mean to say "*Shema Yisrael,* Y-H-W-H *Eloheinu* Y-H-W-H *Echad"*? Some suggest that one should read that second clause, that God is one, in relation to its first clause, that Y-H-W-H is Israel's national deity. This is how Jewish people often teach this prayer, and

51 Green and Schachter-Shalomi, "Thinking through the Metaphors of Deep Ecumenism."

52 Green, *Ehyeh*, 19. Possibly a reference to the teachings of the Magid.

this stance reflects some Jews' belief that the *shema* is a reaction to the polytheism of the other nations or the rejected monolatry of the ancient Israelites. That the Shema means "our God is the only God" is certainly a lesson I have taught in the past to Jewish youth, and in this I have meant to convey, among other thoughts that God is a singular being, not a divisible trinity like in Christianity or a duality like in Zoroastrianism. God is divine, humans are mortal, the oneness of God ensures that there is no crossover, and there are o semi-divine beings, demi-gods, or ascended God-Kings.

This interpretation of the Shema does not fit within a mystical, kabbalistic, understanding of Judaism [53] which gleefully splits and unifies God into many aspects, both masculine and feminine. It divides up qualities of the divine into *sefiroth,* establishes orders of angelic servitors, and weaves legends around ascended humans like Enoch, Eljiah and Pinchas. The Mystical tradition does not read "Y-H-W-H is one" as being a commentary on the national status of the deity. Instead, this tradition understand "Y-H-W-H is one" as a fundamental statement on reality and existence on a cosmic level. Do not read that "Y-H-W-H is one." Read "Y-H-W-H is the only one in all of existence!" There is nothing but God. In Green's words,

> According to the unity of the *Sh'ma*, all is one as though there were no many. Nothing but the One exits. God after creation and God before Creation are one and the same...Infinity goes on as through our world, with all its variety and beauty , with all its suffering and crisis, makes not the slightest bit of difference. The garbing of divine energy in the countless forms of existence is naught when seen from the point of view of infinity. Only the one is real.[54]

[53] As seen in Midrash, Talmud, Hasidut and Merkavah literature.

54 Green, *Seek My Face*, 4.

Green expands on this mystical reading and divides up the liturgical section of the Shema into two separate teachings. The first, relating to "*Shema Yisrael Y-H-W-H Eloheinu Y-H-W-H Echad*," is as discussed above, that the only reality which actually exists is the divine reality and that God is the supreme and only being in existence. All else is, as Green explained to Reb Zalman, a garment composed to beautify the One. Moreso, as Green explains (above), these glorifications and beautifications are ultimately meaningless in comparison to the works of creation. They are too infinitesimally small to actually make any difference to the sheer vastness that is God. This mystical truth, that "all is one as though there were no many."[55] is the called the "higher unity". Humanity, the many, need to remember their humble place and as one recites these words. Whether in prayer or at the moment of death, people should be aware of their incredible smallness, insignificance, isolation, and in stark contrast, God's magnificent unified grandeur .

Green then reverses course. "Blessed is the name of God's glorious kingdom forever and ever!" cries out the silent, quiet, second line of the *Shema*. Here, Green presents the opposite reading of the vast glory and sheer size of the One and celebrates the presence of the divine within the limited mortal sphere. How blessed are human beings, how incredibly fundamentally *important* are they, that the vast and incredible cosmic oneness is willing to shape them in its divine image. To share itself with humanity. To live, and care, and be amongst them! And this divine being is not only with humanity, but also with all that lives! This joyful celebration of God's presence within the smallness of the living world is called the "lower unity."[56] Green suggests that Creation, the world as it is experienced and

55 Green, *Seek My Face*, 4.

56 Green, *Seek My Face*, 5.

perceived, is not a meaningless blip in the vast darkness of all that is, has been, and will be, but instead that when people recite the words of "*baruch shem kavod*" they matter. Humans are witnesses, vessels, and partners to the animating force of all that is.

> Life is about these two truths. We realize that all that surrounds us, all we do, even our own lives themselves are emptiness and vanity, that everything but the ultimate One is mere illusion. At the same time, we know that each moment in our lives and every person and object we encounter exists through the One, as a bearer of its presence. These two truths stand in dialectical relation to one another; they represent the same finely wrought transparent vessel, here seen in emptiness, here in fullness. Our religious task is to see through to the oneness of these two truths, to recognize that the one beyond and the one within are the same One. We are then charged to create a human community that lives and witnesses an ongoing response to that insight. This is what it means to be a Jew. Nothing less. [57]

One might ask, how can one hold both of these truths at the same time? If ones holdsto the "higher unity", that all of existence is in fact unified inside the One, then there is no separateness. This idea invalidates and disregards the "lower unity," which states that God resides and is present in each person because there is no individual in which to dwell! How is it possible to have a self, even if it is created in the divine image, when there is only the singular One of creation? Do I exist or is there only an illusion of myself? This radical doubt may shake seekers to the core. Green says that "the acceptance of Oneness means that each of us is but a part of a great whole, a specification of the unity that embraces us."[58] Further he

57 Green, *Seek My Face*, 5.

58 Green, *Seek My Face*, 7.

alludes to the Zohar[59] which teaches that a unique quality of the divine is God's capacity to both surround (*sovev)* and fill (*memale*) creation.[60] God can at once be both a presence that infuses and sustains all of creation and an entity that exists outside of the boundaries of creation at once.[61]

The traditional method of reciting the Shema, read through the lense of Green's theology, is to declare the "higher unity" at full volume and to quietly, if not silently, recite the "lower unity." Green notes that there is only one day of the year that Jews say both lines of the Shema at full volume.[62] This day is, of course, Yom Kippur, when spirituality is elevated, the gates of heaven are open, and the inner self is fully involved in the process of turning back to God. It is in this state that one is capable of fully and loudly exclaiming the two-sided truth of the *Shema*. This brave and challenging truth can only be shouted aloud that one day of the year, at the time when it is most crucial to abolish any notion of boundaries between the divine and the mundane.

Green's ideas on this topic are reminiscent of the hasidic teaching of Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa:

> "Rabbi Simcha Bunim taught that every person should carry two pieces of paper, one in each pocket: in one pocket "For me the world was created." and in the other "I am but dust and ashes." When we have moments of self loathing take out the first; in moments of grandiosity the second. Our souls are poised between greatness and nothingness; in knowing both are we blessed."[63]

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[59] Zohar Ra'aya Mehemma 3:225a

60 Green, *Seek My Face*, 188.

[61] This, along with several other teachings related to the great unity of God, can be found in the teachings of the Magid. Green is clearly aware of the Magid, but he does not cite the Magid by name as a source of inspiration.

62 Green, *Seek My Face*, 7.

[63] Translation by Rabbi David Wolpe

The note in the first pocket from this lesson, “For me the world was created.” is akin to the “lower unity” that green alludes to. In other terms, the note might read: How blessed is humanity to be part of this creation. I, who am created in the image of God, am a vital part of creation.” Or as Rabbi Nacham of Breslav is credited with saying “ היום בו נולדת הוא היום בו החליט הקב"ה שהעולם אינו יכול להתקיים בלעדיך- The day you were born, is the day that God decided the world could not exist without you.”[64] As the teaching of Rabbi Simcha alludes, one should take out this first note on days when he or she is filled with doubt, feeling distant from the One, or when seeking unity with God seems impossible. This is also what it means to say *“baruch shem kavod.”* This line reminds worshippers that the divine experience is always happening and that they are a part of it. All it takes to initiate this experience and for one to recognize the encounter is occurring, is for him or her to reach into that pocket and be reminded.

The note in the second pocket must then be the “higher unity.” “That I am but dust and ashes” does not only speak to one’s need for humility, but also to the singular oneness of the divine. The creator of all is so large, so overwhelmingly present, that the idea of a unique self is a mere illusion.This idea is another valence of what it means to say *“shema yisrael.”* Glorifying the oneness of God also means acknowledging the smallness of one's self in relation to the divine, being self-critical and realizing that the projections that humans put onto the divine are mostly a representative of their own limited selves, and remembering that the human ability to interact with the infinite is limited by mortal frailness. Thus, Rabbi Simcha’s theological presuppositions (as evidenced by his teachings) are similar to Green’s

64 “Rabbi Nachman of Breslov on Election and Responsibility,” Ancient Hebrew Poetry, November 2, 2009, http://ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com/ancient_hebrew_poetry/2009/11/rabbi-nachman-of-breslov-on-election-and-responsibility.html.

when he (Green) argues that there is only a specific time that Jews are capable of reciting the Shema with its proper intention. More often than not, one is limited to pulling out only one of the notes from his pocket, but there are moments of higher consciousness when a seeker is capable of holding both of these truths in his or her hands at the same time. I would argue that these are the moments when one become aware of the sacred encounter, and is gifted with the blessing to realize the simultaneous truth of both statements.

The illusion of self, in relation to the overwhelming oneness of God, is a challenge with which many religions and philosophies grapple. "Our most basic understanding of who we are is called into question. The great mystics in all traditions, including the masters of Jewish secret lore, have always known this to be the case. They have also understood that we spend most of our lives in flight from such insights."[65] For Green, the *sefiroth* and the *olamot* (worlds) of kabbalistic thought hold one of the answers to this challenge. In the traditional understanding of the *olamot,* there are four separate worlds of descending/ascending order which exist in tandem to the *sefiroth*. While *sefiroth* can be read as a divine map of Godly identity, the *olamot* are a tracing of the energy which emanates from the divine. The lowest of these is *asiyah*.[66]

Asiyah, according to Green, is the realm of individual identity. It is the ego, it defines human perceptions of reality, it is the source of projection, and is tied heavily into the ability to think, rationalize, reason, and to actualize thoughts as actions. *Asiyah* is the lowest of the realms, which is to say that those who inhabit it have the greatest difficulty perceiving divine forces. This lower quality does not make it selfish or debased, nor does one who only inhabits *asiyah* take on these qualities. As Green explains, "It is possible to lead a good life while

65 Green, *Seek My Face*, 7.

66 Green, *Ehyeh*, 62.

remaining on the *asiyah* plane. It is a world, however, that remains far from mystical insight, one in which the duality of Creator and creature and the reality of individual identity stand completely unchallenged." [67] This world of *asiyah* is one in which humans are never aware of the divine encounter. They can only look heavenward, or to the impossible distance, assuming that God dwells far beyond humanity and that humans are unable to interact with the divine. Whatever projections people have created, whatever self they have defined, it goes unquestioned and affirmed. There is no room to realize unity in *asiyah* and for better or worse it seems that the vast majority of people mostly live in the world of *asiyah.*

However, there are worlds beyond *asiyah.* In the world of *yetsirah* the desinction between self and divine begins to slip away. People become aware that the definitions of self, life, and sacred are far more broad than they originally assumed. Green compares entering an awareness of *yetsirah* to a ladder.[68] There are rungs ascending and descending, though it is impossible to determine exactly how many there might be, and the rungs, lead to openings in one's consciousness. This ladder is not heavenly but inward, and as one climbs the ladder they become aware that there are, in fact, an infinite number of rungs, and each one brings a new understanding of the world, of the divine, and of the self. This is the case not because of some great height which the climber may reach, but because of insight he or she may may excavate from within.[69] It is not incumbent on the seeker to climb every rung -some are not for him or her- in order for them to be aware a given rung exists. Rather, one seeks to becomes aware of the individual rungs, and the insight of one rungs leads the climber to the insight of another.

The third world is *beri'ah*. This is the world of vision where truth, at least that part of

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67 Green, *Ehyeh*, 62.

68 Green, *Ehyeh*, 62.

69 This analogy connect to Greens understanding of internal spirituality and the analogy of Abrahams well I discussed in chapter 1, as well as the "inner mountain" or "Sinai within" that I discuss in chapter 3.

it which mortals can understand, can be realized. The idea of this reality corroborates much of Green's theology, particularly his belief that there is only the One and that all of reality is simply a reflection of that One. From the "higher unity" and the smallness of humanity- to the "lower unity" and its vital importance; everything is joined in the One. Even the internal ladder of *yetsirah*, with its separate, infinite, rungs, is understood here as an illusion. However in *beri'ah* there is still a separation of the highest level, between the seeker and God. In *beri'ah* the self is still present enough to receive this illumination, the self can perceive, but not experience, the singular oneness of the vision. [70]

Green uses a parable of the Baal Shem Tov to explain the oneness of God[71], and he uses it again here to reinforce the lesson of *asiyah, yetsirah,* and *beri'ah.*

A great king sought to test his beloved son, to see if he would truly seek him out. He created the optical illusion of a beautiful palace. All who came to see the king, it was announced, would have to come through that palace. One person came to see the king and got only to the outer courtyards. There he came upon barrels of silver coins, glistening in the sunlight. They were so beautiful that he turned aside to gaze upon them and to touch them. He is there still, playing with his silver coins. Another was stronger and he traversed the outer courtyards until he came to the chambers within. But there he found vessels of pure gold so lovely that he could not take his eyes from them. He is there to this day, staring at the gold. One by one the visitors were turned aside by the beauties of the palace. But then the kings true son came along. He saw immediately that the palace was an illusion, that there was nothing there but the king himself. [72]

70 Green, *Ehyeh*, 62.

71 Green, *Ehyeh*, 19.

72 Green, *Ehyeh*, 19.

The worlds of *asiyah* and *yetsirah* are the worlds in which people are distracted by the gold and silver. This does not mean that they are not searching for the king, or that they do not desire to be in the presence of the one, but only that they are unable to bypass the illusion. It is not a failure of character to be unable to pass the test, and by its very nature, the test (reality itself) is meant to seduce those who take it into realms of self, identity, and distance. While those who listen to the story may know that the castle, the gold, and the silver are all reflections of the One, the moment we 'see' them in our minds eye we have already failed the test. To pass the test, listeners should be seek to perceive the king of the story. Nevertheless, even knowing the trick of this parable, it is still very easy to create distance and separation between God and God's creation! Only the single true son of the King can sees that there is nothing, not even a palace. The true son sees nothing but the King. Yet even he is not at the highest level- he is limited to remain at *beri'ah* where "the mind is close to bursting with the fullness of the vision, but it is still the mind. Referring back to the Ba'al Shem Tov's parable of the king and the illusory palace, at this stage I might know that 'there is nothing there but the the King' but it is still 'I' who have that insight."[73]

The final realm, the one that the King's son failed to reach, is called *atsilut,* and it is the one which eliminates any difference between Creator and created. In *atsilut,* there is no perceiver or dweller, self or other, divine or mortal; instead all is truly and completely in unison, there is a great flowing of energy, an emanation of divine power that overruns, unites, and is all things and all time. Green likens *atsilut* to a pair of mirrors, each reflecting the other infinitely, and suggests the ability to determine what is specifically present in onemirror is not only impossible, but meaningless.[74]

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73 Green, *Ehyeh*, 62.

74 Green, *Ehyeh*, 63.

Green expands on this cosmology by dividing the four realms into four ways in which humanity interacts with God.[75] The first realm, *asiyah,* is where God is perceived as the King. The King's subjects, humanity, are obligated to the great King who has given them the ability to live and the permission to exist within the King's property. The subjects have a level of fear and awe to the King who has has great power over everything, over life and death. Should one violate his laws, there could be grave punishment, and there is no fate worse than offending the King or drawing his ire. However this is also a realm of great affection and love. The King is loving and merciful, abounding in mercy and forgiving to even his most ardent foes, and he provides for his subjects, gives them law and protection, and they trust that he has their best interest in heart. Despite all the great love that the King has, though, the King is distant in *asiyah*. This is a God who has little to no interaction with daily life, in the same way that the highest officer of any government is limited by distance. In *asiyah,* distance and boundaries define ones relationship with the king[76].

In *yetsirah,* the understanding of God changes from King to parent.[77] Seekers leave behind the understanding of ruler/ruled and authority as being part of a global cosmic order. Instead, the creator God expands into a loving parent who exists in a relationship with humanity that is both intimate and vital. In *yetsirah,* the human being, created in the image of God, is akin to child who is a descendant and reflection of the parent. In *yetsirah* one engages with a God who loves completely in the way that only a good parent can of his or her child. The child/parent metaphor, though, is not limited strictly to love. The parent still has demands of his or her the child, still enforces rules, and still has expectations of a return on the filial love that they show. Naturally these demands and rules stem from compassion,

75 Green, *Ehyeh*, 63.

76 Green, *Ehyeh*, 65.

77 Green, *Ehyeh*, 66.

concern, and a desire for the child to grow; so it is with God and humanity. In *yetsirah,* there is closeness and intimacy between the divine and humanity, but there also remains a separation. A person is not their parent and never will be, but they are capable of seeing themselves in their parent and the parent in the self.[78]

Before continuing to the two "higher realms", it is worth taking a moment to summarize the main points of the "lower" ones. At the lowest level, *asiyah,* humanity sees God as distant. God is a ruler, and humanity may have fear and love for the King, but its encounters with him are rare. Only the most splendid, or unusual, of occasions allows humanity to perceive the One, much like a people seeing their head of state at a formal event. The subjects may be certain that the King is real, they may be in fear of his power or justice, but he is theoretical and symbolic; not personal. There can be no doubt that a relationship exists between the ruler and the ruled, but it is a relationship which lacks intimacy.

One can transcend this level when one realizes that it is possible to have a closer relationship to God than one of King/subject. When one begins to think of God as parent, it is not simply a transformation of intimacy and formality, it is also a projection of oneself onto the divine and the divine onto him or herself. The ability to see God in oneself, is the first step towards divine unity. Interactions with one's parents are not rare,[79] since for years of people's lives their parent is with them at every step. Further, there are things that one does that are direct reflections of their parents, presenting the lessons and values that were imbued within them as children. Likewise, there are moments when seekers emulate God, in the same way a children emulate their parents. Divine unification, at this level, does not mean the abrogation of self, but it is the recognition of the divine which is within the self.

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78 Green, *Ehyeh*, 66-68.

79 Obviously there are those who do not have relationships with their parents or birth parents for any number of valid reasons. This isn't meant to be a 'normalizing' or 'ostracizing' of any specific parent/child relationship, but instead a reflection of the teaching as Green presents it.

Moving onward, the third world of *beri'ah* is that in which the projection of God as parent is left behind and a new mode of relating to the divine is embraced. Green argues that in *beri'ah* we perceive and relate to God as a romantic lover. He writes, "now in *beri'ah* we give vent to our longing for reunion with the Source, the embrace of our soul in the arms of the beloved… the desire to open to God as beloved does to lover, to be filled with God's presence as the lover is filled, is one that allows no holding back."[80] Sexual and romantic urges towards the divine might strike some as strange or alien to Judaism. Certainly outside of Kabbalah and *Shir haShirim* the romantic and sexual themes of *beri'ah* are usually hidden and only secretively alluded to in Jewish texts, rather than being overtly discussed. Yet Green argues that *Yedid Nefesh* from the Kabbalat Shabbat liturgy, among other texts, is adorned in romantic prose and sexual longing and that the text of the Zohar "presents the full restoration of passion to the love life of God and the Jewish devotee." [81]

This desire for sexual intimacy is another level in the advancement of divine unification. In a healthy sexual relationship, one in which spiritual and emotional intimacy is created beyond the physical, there is a melding of two into one. It is said that people become "lost in each other," and there is a sensation of coming together, unity, physical creation, and even tension as one attempts to fulfill and complete the other's experience. Sexual sensations can be rapturous, sending a person "outside" of their body for a time. In another context, all of the above sensations might be considered holy work, so why not in the act of sexual intercourse as well? It is not only the physical sensation of love which seekers in *beri'ah* experience, but also the loving relationship which exists between two partners. Longing for the other, missing them when they are not near, the desire for something as simple as touch or

80 Green, *Ehyeh*, 68.

81 Green, *Ehyeh*, 70.

a glimpse of their face.

In a romantic relationship, there are times when the other is a part of you in a way that no other being is in that they know you and they see you in a raw and openly vulnerable state which is reserved for no other. This is a higher level of intimacy than that of a parent/child or a subject/ruler: this is a level of unification which one achieves, not out of the accident of birth or the fluctuating boundaries of the world, but out of personal choice. The hasidic term *devekut*, or cleaving, with all of the sexual imagery that it should contain, captures the sense of this relationship. Souls, when seeking unity with the divine, do not just desire to be near God. They wish to cling, to cleave, to enwrap, to be surrounded by the majesty of divinity and to lose a part of their individuality within the intensity that defines a powerful relationship with God.

Lastly, Green explains that the final world, *atsilut*, is mostly impenetrable to mortal understanding. It is the nexus of all reality, the source of divine emanations and the original home of the *sefiroth*. "It is that place beyond all places toward which our entire journey has been leading. It is the place beyond love, the innermost heart where the flames of passion are cooled. In *atsilut* there is no longer a need to speak of love between the self and God, because 'between' no longer exists."[82] In *atsilut,* the self has no more place because in it individual boundaries and personalities melt and meld into the post-experience of divine unity. Experience is not even possible in *atsilut*, because experience requires the I/self to experience it, akin to the hasidic tale that require others to experience the palace. Instead Green defines *atsilut* best as "moments of grace, this-worldly foretastes of that paradise where the Oneness of God will be whole, unchallenged by the stirring of any separate self…"[83]

82 Green, *Ehyeh*, 71.

83 Green, *Ehyeh*, 73.

Green, along with his colleague Reb Zalman, points out that this once-unknowable level of divine unity has now been experienced by more than just hasidic or kabbalistic masters with the help of psychedelic drugs like LSD.[84] Green, open about his own use of such substances, points out that his experience with these chemicals matched the experiences of the mystical sages who had claimed to experience *atsilut.* Yet he also warns that experiencing these drugs without supervision or prior training would fail to bring about any kind of spiritual significance and would only add to a users self-projections onto the divine rather than giving a taste of spiritual unity and oneness.

I have argued, through Greens lens of panentheism, that the divine encounter is always happening. We, humanity, may occasionally glimpse the sacred connection which is always occuring in our lives. This divine awareness, or sacred connection, is simply a shade of the idea that all is one. Humans are constantly engaged in divine encounter because we are formed as garments, or organs, of the One. However how aware of this is any individual? It varies, and through his use of the 4-worlds, Green is able to describe the ability to sense this sacred connection/divine unity. The vast majority of people live in *asiyah,* where they live productive, good, and meaningful lives. But while one lives in *asiyah* he or she remains unaware of the divine encounter. To those who live in *asiyah,* God is remote and distant, like a distant King and it never occurs to those who dwell in *asiyah* that the encounter is happening even if they look for it.

It is possible, though, to ascend to various higher levels of intimacy with God, and with those levels of intimacy there is also divine unity. Seekers can work towards becoming aware of their own being in relationship with God, and ascend the inner rungs of their spiritual ladders towards higher worlds. That relationship can manifest as that of as a loving

84 Green, *Ehyeh*, 72.

parent, a passionate lover, or, at the highest levels, even the dissolution of the self altogether. What is constant in these higher levels of unity are the realizations that God is a part of the self, that one is a part of the divine, and that the individual seeker is not alone in apprehending this truth. Once the self glimpses its intimacy with God, it becomes clear that all are similarly linked with every living thing through this great divine truth.

Chapter 3: Sinai Within

"The view that it was all spoken at Sinai belongs to the school of Rabbi Akiva, a man of uncommon sense. Akiva is a mystic who sees Sinai as a moment beyond time, a revelatory/apocalyptic event. The eternal and transtemporal God for a moment crashes into linear, temporal history, transforming it totally. All the rules are suspended in that great mystical moment: past, present and future are fused into eternal presence, making it an event that can thus be relived forever."

-Arthur Green: Radical Judaism

In this third lesson I will address a fundamental question that arises from Green's theology and his attempts to explain it. As stated previously, the theology of panentheism supports a belief that the divine encounter is a constant factor of life. The mystical understanding of "all is one" also buoys the belief that God is all and always happening. If one accepts these two ideas, then he or she might ask, what then is the importance of the revelation at Sinai? To clarify, if all moments of time are divine encounters, if all existence is framed through the oneness of God, then what is the importance of that singular moment of Sinai, which contains the giving of Torah, the manifestation of the deity, and "the" divine encounter? It is worth exploring more detail how a "Jewish theology" can continue to argue for the primacy of Sinai while also asserting that the encounter with God lacks limitations imposed by time or space.

Green's answer to this question is simple, and in proper rabbinic tradition, he maintains that both of these conceits are true: "The religion of ancient Israel, as embodied symbolically in that moment at Sinai, continues to represent for us the result of one of the great human encounters with divinity. For us as Jews- existentially speaking- it is the greatest

such encounter of all time. Indeed *it is the only we know*."[85] According to him, Sinai still retains its primacy and God is always happening. For Green, the revelation at Sinai is aimed specifically at Jews, while the divine experience of panentheism is open to people of all religious background. We writes. "In turning to address our people's ancient tale of Sinai from this theological perspective, we find ourselves turning doubly from the general to the specific. We turn both from the universal-nature to the specifically human, and from the universal-human to the specifically Jewish."[86] As Green clarifies here, he is turning from the general to the specificic in two ways, not only from of all humanity's experience of the divine to the Jew's such experience, but also from the perspective of the universal, of all living things, to that of the specifically human.

Green continues in <u>*Seek My Face*</u> to explain the primacy of the Sinai moment for *Jews*. Speaking universally, Green praises the divine call and moral response that people of other faiths and cultures have received within their own traditions. However he adds about Jew's potential attraction to other religious traditions that " these [other faiths] are not existentially open to us; they are not ours. True participation in a spiritual language requires the whole of the human heart. Each heart can speak only one such language. Our heart is given wholly to this one." [87] Sinai is thus the moment when the Jewish people engaged with the divine encounter as a community, a moment of creation and discovery, which all interpretation of Torah is still struggling to answer and describe. The Torah, in all its mystery and meanings, is the uniquely Jewish method of communication with the One.

In *Radical Judaism,* Green considers the Sinai experience further, and he attempts to explain what actually happened there by borrowing from the perspectives of multiple scholars

85 Green, *Seek My Face*, 107.

86 Green, *Seek My Face*, 98.

87 Green, *Seek My Face*, 108.

and and from various facets of the Jewish tradition. “Remember that these three questions ‘What was spoken at Sinai?’ ‘What is the Word of God?’ and ‘What is Torah?’ are not identical. God spoke both before and after Sinai, as the Torah itself clearly tells us, and ‘Torah’ may include all of our commentaries, not just the written Word.”[88] The first question, ‘What was spoken at Sinai?’, is Green’s first target. Green is caught between, on the one hand, a dogmatic claim that all of Torah, each word and phrase, is delivered word for word on the mountain top. On the other hand there is the logical dissonance that relates to certain phrases of the Torah which appear to suggest that the Torah’s text could not have come into existence except at times other than at Sinai (i.e., anachronism that would be generated by this theology), or, alternatively, that suggest some divine fatalism (i.e., that these texts revealed a predetermined set of events for occurrences in the future).

This chapter’s epigraph details Rabbi Akivas mystical, apocalyptic perception of Sinai. Green points out that Akiva’s claim of time and space collapsing inwards and creating a singularity of Torah wherein all is revealed at once and all is at once revealed, is not a “misguided pseudo-historical claim but rather a mystical apocalyptic vision.”[89] According to Green Akiva is speaking from “his inner mountain,”[90] from his mystical perspective, which abolishes the concept of linear time and is more concerned with the divine encounter than with minute details. It is later generations who take Akiva’s mystical vision, that all was revealed at once, and transform into the dogmatic claim that every jot and tittle of Torah is divine revelation.

An alternative to this “all is revealed” dogma arguably is rooted in the the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are commonly accepted by the Jewish tradition as

88 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 87.

89 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 88.

90 Green, *Seek My Face*, 106.

divine content revealed at Sinai and, according to Greens teacher Heschel, can be read as the *entirety* of that which is revealed by the Divine at Sinai.[91] These commandments, an "ethical Torah" in which much of Jewish and Christian history is bound up, stands as Greens "basis of a contemporary religious and moral vision."[92] Yet just as quickly as Green starts to define the experience of Sinai, he raises doubts and counterpoints from within the tradition. Quoting the Babylonian Talmud[93] Green brings a well-known midrash which states that while God certainly spoke and declared the first two commandments, 'I am the Lord' and 'Thou Shalt Have no Others,' what is not explicitly written in the Torah is that the experience was traumatic and terrifying for the Israelites. The Israelites begged Moses to stop God from speaking the rest of the Decalogue directly, lest they die from the terror of the experience. For this reason it is Moses, not God, who speaks the rest of the commandments. This midrash closes with the teaching that all 248 positive mitzvot can be learned out from the first commandment, and that all 365 negative precepts can be learned from the second. Green concludes "All we need to accept, one might say, is Gods 'I am' and the notion that this alone is to shape and limit our behavior. All the rest will follow."[94]

Green brings another challenge to a maximalist reading of the Ten Commandments, this time from the hasidic tradition, from Rabbi Mendel of Rymanow. He writes: "Only the first letter of the commandments, the *aleph* of *anokhi*, "I am," was spoken by the divine voice alone, Rabbi Mendel claims. All the rest was revealed through Moses."[95] The *aleph* has a symbolic numerological value, being the first letter/number, it embodies the divine unity of

91 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 178.

92 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 89.

93 b. Makkot 24a

94 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 89.

95 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 90.

God. But as Green notes, quoting here Gershom Scholem, the letter aleph is silent when unmarked. “Is this all God has to say? Or does the divine voice in fact only make room, through an act of *tsimtsum*, self-limitation, to allow the human voice to speak and articulate the teaching in the human tongue?”[96] For Green, the divine voice -whether it appears in complete sentences, a single letter, or in the intake of breath followed by silence- is always a tool for expressing the fundamental truth that underlies his mystical understanding of reality, that all is One. He writes:

> “Here Torah, as the divine word that is one with its Source, takes us back to that which we were seeking: a Jewish language for expressing the oneness of all that is. God is the underlying One behind and within all existence. Torah is the underlying One behind and within all language. The oneness underlying ‘Creation’ and the oneness underlying revelation are the same One.” [97]

I would like to return to, and expand upon, a phrase that I used earlier when discussing Rabbi Akiva, the “inner mountain.” Green coins this term when discussing the Israelites’ divine encounter at Sinai.[98] As I explained in the first chapter of this work, the traditional Jewish understanding of Sinai is as an “upper/heavenly” divine experience, a divine horizon that Green wants to change, and it is in connection to this agenda that the “inner mountain” intersects with our discussion. What is the inner mountain?

> “We are talking about an inner straining of the human mind to the breaking point- but rather than a *breakdown* that leads to madness or confusion, we envision a *breakthrough* that leads to new creative achievements. This may come in the form of an insight that did not exist before, a flash of intuition that is instantaneously

96 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 90.

97 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 92.

98 Green, *Seek My Face*, 106–7.

translated into the medium in which the creator works: into music into mathematical formula, into words. The creative energy, like the divine light, is undifferentiated."[99]

For Akiva the inner mountain was the mystic's view, the creative insight, which allowed him to perceive Sinai as a moment beyond time. For others the inner mountain, this inner Sinai, is another name for the divine connection which is identified by the outpouring of creative energy, an outpouring of creative energy which is identified by its simultaneous insight into unity with the One.

Sinai, the important, particularistic moment of divine encounter for the Israelites is an example of this kind of creative outpouring. The physical "outer" mountain may have existed at only one point in time, but the inner mountain continues to exist. According to Green, the inner mountain, this massive overflow of creative energy which is achieved through union with the creator as known by the name of Y-H-W-H, is a covenant with the Jewish people, a covenant that promises that Sinai is not a one-time moment in the wilderness, but is an eternal, ongoing experience. "Revelation reveals the possibility of revelation, not just that once, but whenever the human heart and mind are open to it…. The name Y-H-W-H is the very core of this revelation, as bearer of the insight that God was-is-will be, containing all of time in eternal presence." [100] Green closes his initial thoughts on Sinai by making it clear that the content of what was revealed on the mountain is impossible to determine. Moreso, whatever content that was revealed is ultimately secondary to the revelation of the creator, the promise of a relationship with the One, and the covenantal agreement that such moments do not end even when, or if, Sinai did.[101]

Green's argument also reveals that initial question with which this chapter started,

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99 Green, *Seek My Face*, 106.

100 Green, *Seek My Face*, 109.

101 Green, *Seek My Face*, 108.

about the importance of Sinai in a panentheistic reality, contains a fundamental misunderstanding. This initial question assumes that Sinai becomes less important as a moment of divine interaction in a world of constant, potential divine interaction and it assumes that Judaism either has a singular celebrated, communal moments marked by holidays and ritual (Shavuot), or we have a heightened sense of mystical reality which allows a sense of constant ascension. Green makes it clear that we should be celebrating that such a connection was capable of being forged and that God was capable of being known to the Jewish people through the name of Y-H-W-H. He also communicates that moments of divine connection do not "use up" a limited resources or make unity with God banal or common, but instead that each moment is worthy of celebration.

One might imagine then, the discussion of this chapter is superfluous in an analysis of Green's theology. If the question that prompted this chapter is based upon a misunderstanding, and if the content of what is given at Sinai is impossible to determine, what can be taken away from Greens understanding of revelation? For Green, revealed Torah is something altogether different from the traditional Jewish understanding of Torah; it is neither dictated, sacred law nor a repository of the secrets of creation. "I look up it not as the specifically revealed will of God, and not as a body of binding legislation, but rather as the ancient and powerful root of our people's ongoing sacred task of building a religious civilization. It is the firm foundation of all that comes in its wake." [102] For Green, the Torah, in its revealed form, is the core of what it means to build a human society based on a connection to the greater divine truth. Jews have done this in many ways, in many places and in many times, and have both succeeded and failed in doing so. The attempt to build a society which reflects the yearning for divine connection is born out of every possible manner of

102 Green, *Seek My Face*, 119

emotion: love, anger, fear, loyalty even rebellion. The only constant factor in Jewish civilization, according to Green, is the presence of the Torah and its evolution through, and in, each generation. In his words, "All of Judaism is an ongoing project of commentary, each generation's struggle with reinterpreting Torah." [103]

Green shows awareness that this is not an argument which will satisfy everyone. Can it possibly be that every Jewish response to the divine is only a projection, a societal construct which the Jews themselves have fashioned? Is there nothing of the divine in Torah? As Green frames the question:

"Are the words and religious institutions of Torah, then, *only* human? Would we say *merely* human? Is there no divine presence about them? Let us remember once again that we are operating in a universe where the lines between the divine and the human are less than rigid. Can we not say that the *tselem Elohim*, 'the image of God,' is reflected in the religious institutions that human beings create? If we are a part of divinity and bear its presence within us, the Jewish people over centuries has the power to sanctify, which is to say 'bring the divine essence into,' the essential forms of its religious life for all its descendants? Could this be what Mordecai Kaplan meant when he spoke of the mitzvot as the *sancta* of the Jewish people? The essential forms of tradition are indeed holy and must be followed, not because God dictated them from the mountaintop, but because the Jewish people, using its own sacred energy, declared them holy to its God."[104]

With these words, Green seems content to be rid of the mythology around Sinai.[105] The divine is within us, he writes, and the the power of our *kavanah* and the full history of

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103 Green, *Seek My Face*, 120.

104 Green, *Seek My Face*, 120.

105 However in *Radical Judaism,* Green has some new ideas about the importance of myth and calls for a religion based on remythologization.

our tradition have sanctified our rituals; there is, therefore, no need to imagine that God directly handed this tradition to us a gift from heaven. Instead the Torah is, in Green's words, "*what we bring to the mountain*. We invest them and forever associate them with the holiness we encounter there."[106] There is holiness at the mountain. There is transformative power there, and one can find relationship with the One.

Years later, in *Radical Judaism,* Green expanded on the potential of Sinai as a transformational and holy place for the people of Israel, as a sacred community. He writes,"this is when we become 'a kingdom of priests, a holy nation' (Ex. 19:6). Priesthood makes no sense without a laity, in this case one that includes the entire human family."[107] Green envisions the tasks of Priesthood as one of education, a universal call to help others approach the One. He makes clear that the Jewish priesthood, created at Sinai, is (of course) not the only institution of religious education in the world, only that Sinai was the moment when the Jewish people became capable of sharing this experience with others and helping them reach it. The fundamental truth that the priesthood strives to teach is the same truth that the mystics would eventually become aware of, and that Green heralds in his writings, that "all of being is one in Y-H-W-H, and every person is the image of God. All the rest is commentary."[108]

For Green, this teacher/priestly covenant, established at Sinai, blends the line between particularism and universalism. Sinai may be a particularly Jewish moment, but Israel is not alone in its claim on the divine, and a status as a Jewish priest/teachers does not change that. He explains that he "believe[s] that the One is revealed in all hearts, to all people, in much the same way. The variation comes from our end, from the cultural settings and response we

106 Green, *Seek My Face*, 121.

107 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 107.

108 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 107.

offer to that universal call. Israel is unique among the nations in the way we have heard and responded, not in the fact that we are called."[109] A tenet of Judaism is that Sinai is the moment that Israel, and the Jews, say "yes" to covenant and "yes" to God. It is the moment that they were bound to eternal covenant and committed to bringing the divine into this world. Greens understands the covenant as a human initiative, our response to a moment of divine encounter. He argues that the human response to the divine call is to climb the mountain, to make an offering, and to bind oneself in covenant. The One initiated the call, but it was humanity's obligation to recognize the call for what it was, and then to decide what to do with such an invitation.

Green also explores the question of whether or not (and if so, where) God was at Sinai. As he asks then answers "Does my claim that covenant is a human initiative serve to exclude God from it? Am I saying that it is *merely* human? Hardly! As God is present within the human heart, God is there within us as we say 'Yes' to Sinai...God is present to us from more angles than we can see."[110] Here, Green solidifies his position that the covenant was created by God and Humanity together, but he also makes clear that the God of which he speaks is the one that exists inside the human heart, the one which calls humanity to exist in covenant with the sacred, and calls to all nations in their own way. This is a God who is heard in the call and is manifested in the act of brining sacredness into the world through teachings of universal love and unity. Green also clarifies that his interpretation of the covenant is just as mutually binding as the traditional reading:

"Does God give to us, open to us, in response to our loyalty to that covenant? As long as we keep our expectations on the spiritual plane, I can answer with a whole hearted 'Yes!'

109 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 108.

110 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 109.

Here is the great lesson of love; the more you give the more you receive. To open yourself to serve others as a channel of divine grace, to bring light and blessings into their lives is endlessly rewarding. The more light you shine forth, the more comes pouring through. The inner Wellspring is one whose 'waters do not betray' and never run dry. This is all I have by way of faith in reward. *And it is plenty.*"[111]

In this statement Green personalizes the divine. This is an important point, because inasmuch as statements about divine unification and love are meant to be about blurring the lines of relationship between one and the One, it is easy to lose track of how one actually goes about doing this. In Judaism this relationship comes through the study of Torah, traditionally viewed as the divine word manifest, and Green maintains this core doctrine of engaging with the text even as he denies the traditional understanding of revelation. He explains his belief that "to be a Jew is to be a student. To be a self-affirming Jew is to love and study Torah. It is no small matter that the rabbis considered study equal in value to all the other mitzvot combined. We are people devoted to a text. *Yisra'el ve oriata had hu;* "Israel and Torah are one."[112]

For Green, the Torah is a product of human origins, but its human origins do not diminish from its purpose or our need of it. As Green stated elsewhere, each generation of Jews is a part of the commentary on the text, and this is true not only of the traditional commentaries, the works which are commonly attributed to "the Rabbis," but also of the mystical tradition, hasidut, poetry, art, philosophy, Judaica and more. The very history of Israel the state, the people, and the land is commentary on Torah. A Jews life, too, is a commentary on the Torah. The study of Torah, therefore, is far greater than the books that

111 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 109.

112 Green, *Seek My Face*, 133.

can sit on a shelf or than any ancient knowledge passed down for untold generations. Torah is life itself, and Torah study is any means by which Jews engage in gaining a greater understanding of life.

What Jews create today, the study of Torah in all its forms, will eventually be passed onto the next generation. Green explains this idea in the following way;

> "We do this faithfully only as we submit ourselves to the role of the student, *as we are willing to allow ourselves to be shaped by the text as we have received it and made it our own.* The unchanging text serves as the counterpoint to our constant evolution and development. Yes, Judaism *must* grow and change in every age."[113]

Here, Green does something radical in separating the Torah from the text. While the text comes down to each generation unchanged, *the "Torah" does not*. Torah is shaped by its commentaries, by those who live it, and by the generational struggle to interpret and reshape tradition, a tradition that, as Green eloquently states "Tradition is a precious and fragile commodity in our age. We bear it carefully, adding to it our own, to be sure, but not seeking entirely to bend it to our will, lest it break in our hands."[114] Naturally, then, each generation passes this struggle and this growth, on to the next generation who receives that same unchanged text and an all new Torah.

For generations, according to Green, the text of Torah was known only through its scholarly study. "Judaism in the past has been both overly bookish and excessively narrow in focus." He writes, continuing to state that "the turn away from nature as the great testimony to Y-H-W-H, which was still essential to our religious life in biblical times, towards a religion where God was known only through the worlds of books and commentaries was a

113 Green, *Seek My Face*, 134.

114 Green, *Seek My Face*, 134.

terrible narrowing of the Jewish soul." [115] This critique of traditional Torah study is the reason why Green is excited about current generations of Jews, both American and Israeli, who are returning to seeing God's presence in the world. For the Israeli Zionist project, both secular and religious, that return is deeply rooted in the physical land of Israel, and for American Jews it is rooted in those who are in the processes of rediscovering a God deeply connected to physical reality. However God is not only in the natural world, because God is also present in the very process of study, its moments of intellectual curiosity, the concomitant reaching and grasping for divine connection, and the inevitable journey to one's inner mountain. These experiences are all fundamentally human, and they prompt true physical and mental growth that reveals the presence of God that surrounds and exists within everything. This type of study, this interaction and wonder, is the chain of tradition which stretches backwards through generations, and it is an essential chain because "to build a Judaism that will be of deep meaning to Jews in the future, we need to drink deeply of the teachings of the Jewish past. The religious value of Torah study is a seeking out of the ways in which the divine presence has been manifest in the Jewish people since the most ancient times. Its meaning changes, as it must, but it is still Torah."[116]

To Conclude, let us ask: What is Sinai according to Green? It is the uniquely Jewish moment of unification between covenant, revelation, and Torah. However, in Green's theology, the meanings of these terms -covenant, revelation, and Torah -have shifted. Green's covenant is based on humanity's response to the divine call, a call which is always happening, is occurring universally, and is open to multiple truths. Green's divine call is as universal and broad as humanity, since it is a call that comes from the depths of humanity's

115 Green, *Seek My Face*, 135.

116 Green, *Seek My Face*, 135.

inner mountain. Sinai is the moment when Israelites hear and respond to this ongoing call. Their response, and the divine encounter which results in the creation of Torah, is an outpouring of creative energy, a flash of connection between the creator of everything and the creation engaged in its own work. The covenant is God and humanity's promise to continue to bring sacred moments into the world, to search, and to seek to uncover the holy which is present in all things.

The theophany at Sinai was the moment that the Israelites entered this covenant and, likewise, heard a message that was special and particularly theirs. This was a message that they were meant to carry into the future. Their message was Torah and the promise of a continued relation with the divine, and this included the Torah in its text, and in its unique, generational message of interpretation and transformation, the binding and rebinding of each generation to see themselves within both aspects of this covenant, and an obligation to carry the Torah as the message of God's love and the mystical unity of all things within the One. The relationship, forged by this covenant reaches a physical, communal manifestation at Sinai that continues to live on throughout all time not just due to its sheer vastness and importance, but also because of its lives within the experience of each seeker and each new generation that encounters it. The inner mountain, the Sinai within, that all people carry forward is an echo of the potential to be in communication with the One.

Chapter 4: The Personal Quest

"Like our Ancestors, we , too are in search of sparks of light. We, too, find them scattered throughout the world, perhaps even in some places where the kabbalists of old would not have dared to look for them. We, too, are guided by Torah in our search, though for us this guidance is more that of a collective ancient wisdom of divinity as manifest in our people than it is the once-given manual or definitive road map… We train our inner eye to see the One that underlies the many, to see all of life as the garbing of Y-H-W-H, the single self,. With the renewed concentration of energy that comes from this meditative turn inward, we send ourselves forth into the outer world, there to do the redemptive deed that joins our inward kavanah to reality."

-Arthur Green, Seek my Face

When I began the process of writing a senior rabbinical thesis, the subjects of mysticism and spirituality were far from my mind. My original goal was to write about *kashrut* and its intersection with modern technology, specifically the new technology of "lab-grown meat". When it became clear that this subject would not translate into a suitable thesis, Dr. Haim Rechnitzer guided me toward an exploration of mysticism and *hasidut*, subjects that I had just finished studying with him for a semester. I was uncertain, though, what period of hasidut to study and which texts, or authors, to approach. It occurred to me then that, perhaps, I was not looking to study hasidic texts, but instead to study the application of the stories from these texts in the Reform movement. In a course on the History of Reform Judaism I had taken with him, Dr. Gary Zola had made a point that seemed to suggest that the ideology of the early Reform movement stood almost perfectly opposite to the *hasidic*

Judaism of its era. Yet I noted that *hasidic* tales, *niggunim*, and the ideology of "a God who desires the heart"[117] were quite common in the 21st century Reform Movement I knew. What had changed, when had it changed, and who had changed it?

Dr. Zola and Dr. Rechnitzer both told me to ask the same man, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner. Everyone agreed that Kushner had been on the cutting edge of introducing "Jewish spirituality" and "Jewish meditation" into mainstream Reform culture. If anyone would know, if in fact anyone was responsible for the infusion of this *hasidut* into Reform Judaism, it would him. Kushner, the celebrated author, mystic, and Reform thinker, was a name I was familiar with. His book *God was in this Place but I Did Not Know:Finding Self, Spirituality, and Ultimate Meaning*, was one of the first meaningful Jewish texts I read before beginning Rabbinical School.[118] I reached out to Kushner to discuss my question.

Kushner patiently made time for me and when he heard my question answered, roughly speaking, as follows. "Sam, I don't think anyone really cares about that. Your senior thesis shouldn't be about who changed what when, but how can you grow and change now. The person you should be reading is Rabbi Arthur Green."[119] When I conveyed Kushner's response to Dr. Rechnitzer, he agreed that I should follow Kushner's advice. He told me to "study Green, write about him, and at the end write about how Green has affected you and whether or not Green affects the learning here at HUC-JIR as well. Is he present? Is he not? Should he be?" That is what this final chapter contains. I will ask whether or not Green's influence felt at HUC-JIR Cincinnati and what HUC-JIR could gain by incorporating Greens teachings into its courses. My personal experience with Green will be communicated in my

[117] A phrase attributed to the Baal Shem Tov as a central principle of hasidut.

[118] Alongside Rabbi Alan Lew's *"This is Real and you are Completely Unprepared"*

[119] This was part of a larger conversation with Rabbi Kushner, who graciously agreed to speak with me not knowing anything more than that I was a student seeking his advice and guidance. I am immensely grateful for his advice and I have put this story here as a testament to the powerful influence he had on me.

conclusion.

HUC-JIR's Cincinnati Campus offers multiple courses on religious thinking, though only one which I will discuss here, Theology 401, Conversation in Jewish Theology, is (as it names suggests) formally classified as a theology course. However in this chapter, I will be discussing in detail the presence (or absence) of Greens theological influence in one other course as well, a survey course that, though not classified as theology still stresses theological ideas: Philosophy 402 (Modern Jewish Thought.) Two additional elective courses, Philosophy 505 (Introduction to Kabbalah) and Theology 524 (Hasidism) are also worth mentioning, though in them the issue of Green's influence is somewhat muddied. Green's works are required reading for both of these courses, but students encounter him and his writings in his role as a scholar of mysticism, not as a theologian.Thus since the purpose of this chapter is to study Green's theological influence, and not his scholarly influence, I will limit my discussion only to the two theological survey classes I first mentioned (Theology 401 and Philosophy 402). Nevertheless, my personal experience of understanding Green was vastly enriched by those two courses, and this work would not exist without them.

Philosophy 402, Modern Jewish Thought, is an incredibly broad survey course that covers Jewish intellectual history over nearly 500 years, including writings of Baruch Spinoza in the 17th century, Immanuel Kant in the 18th, and Eugene Borowitz, Yeshayahu Leibotwitz, David Hartman and Joseph Soloveitchik. Green does not appear on the syllabus nor does any mystical writer or thought leader. The most mystical content in Modern Jewish Thought is arguably Martin Buber, though this is the Buber of *I and Thou*, not the one of *Tales of the Chasidim* or *Legends of the Baal Shem.* However, Buber is not the closest that one gets to reading Green. Abraham Joshua Heschel, Greens teacher and mentor, is present on the syllabus with his transformative work *God in Search of Man.*

Stating all this is not meant to be dismissive of Modern Jewish Though's way of relating to Green. Both *I and Thou* and *God in Search of Man* contain fundamental concepts of Jewish theology which are necessary to understand Green's writings. Buber writes in *I and Though* about inner and outer experiences[120], describes situations very similar to divine unification, and pushes against the boundaries of two and one, all themes used by Green which I have investigated in this thesis. When Buber says, and I read, "all actual life is an encounter,"[121] it now brings to my mind images and echoes of mystical panentheism and the secret of the Shema. Bubers closing statement that "without *you* a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not human"[122] contains a hint of *atsilut,* the fourth world of mystical theology which is impossible for humans to fully experience and comprehend while maintaining a sense of identity.

Green is conscious of this connection and credits buber's intellectual legacy in his introduction to Radical Judaism[123] Therefore, it is not a stretch to argue that understanding Heschel leads to greater understanding of Green. There are moments in Green's writing when his flowery prose, or lofty imagery, brings to mind his teacher. Pieces of Greens ideas about projection can be found in Heschel,[124] and Heschel too argues that the natural world should be noted as part of the glory of God, writing that "to the biblical man, the beauty of the world issued from the grandeur of God; His Majesty towered beyond the breath-taking mystery of the universe. Rather than being crushed by the mystery, he was inspired to praise the majesty. And rather than praise the world for its beauty, he called upon the world to praise its

120 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 56.

121 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 62.

122 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 85.

123 Green, *Radical Judaism*, 6.

124 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (London: Souvenir Press Limited, 2009), 195.

Creator."[125] Radical amazement, Heschel's core doctrine, is rooted in a realization of God's magnificent presence. Understanding such moments is central to fully comprehending what Green describes as the Sinai within, and to reaching higher levels of consciousness, awareness, and relation to God.

Green's mystical theology may not be explicitly present in Modern Jewish Thought, but, as we have seen, two of the men who shaped him are. This reality raises the question, should he too be included? I suppose that entirely depends on what the College-Institute (and this course's instructure) most desire to teach in this survey course, the formative scholars of this field or the inheritors of such scholars' tradition. As Jews, we are deeply invested in the chain of tradition, and choosing one of the options above should not mean rejecting the other: that would be foolish. Thus, including Green's theology in this course need not be a case of substitution, but rather addition. Would reading modern, living, authors be advantageous to Modern Jewish Thought? Almost certainly.[126] Does this mean that Green is the modern living author who should be incorporated into this course? Perhaps not. Reading Green in the context of Buber and Heschel may make sense, but reading him without providing any context on Kabbalah, alongside the scholars like Moshe Idel and Gershom Scholem who define the field, would be difficult.

This brings me to Theology 401, Conversation in Jewish Theology (CJT).[127] CJT was also a survey course, but it was a class based on the conversations[128] between thinkers and less concerned with covering a given historical period. Despite being a survey course, CJT focused less on covering a wide breadth of topics than on covering a limited number of ideas in depth; it was less about how Modern Judaism had gotten to its current state and more

125 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (London: Souvenir Press Limited, 2009), 96.

126 We did read Judith Plaskows *Standing again at Sinai* as an insertion to the course.

127 Which I will refer to from now on as CJT.

128 Both real and imagined.

concerned with major theological concerns and their effect upon the students.“When someone asks you, ‘Why did God let/make this happen?’ you will need to respond in word and in actions. Your response should be based on your theology or if not entirely in harmony with it, at least it should not be antithetical to it.”[129] The course asked the learners to read some of the great Jewish theological minds and to create a theology in conversation with them. As a result, the class revisited many of the thinkers we had been exposed to in Modern Jewish Thought: Plaskow, Levinas, Heschel, Soloveitchik and Hartman.

Though Green was briefly discussed in class he does not appear on the syllabus. He was mentioned as a thinker one could potentially study, with which one could be in conversation with, and that is ostensibly still the case at HUC-JIR Cincinnati. In fact, just recently I saw another student, one taking CJT this semester, taking Green’s *Seek my Face* out of the library.When I asked this student why she was checking Green’s book out, she told me he was one of the thinkers that she was supposed to be in dialogue with over the course of the semester. Thus, it would seem that while Green may not get the spotlight in this course, he and and mystical panentheism are permitted to stand in dialogue with other Jewish theologies to be part of rabbinical students’ personal, spiritual growth.

To conclude, let us consider what HUC-JIR Cincinnati would gain from incorporating Green, further, into its students formal learning. The goal of CJT was for the student to create a personal theology. At least on a personal level, I am uncertain how successful that aspect of the class was. I believe that this is because while exposure to the great minds of Judaism is a way to familiarize oneself with the theology of others, proximity to greatness can stifle one's own creative impulse. When reading the theologies of great thinkers of the past century, Soloveitchik, Borowitz and Hartman in particular, I could only question wonder: What right

[129] Jan Katzew, “Conversation in Jewish Theology,”syllabus, HUC-JIR, Cincinnati, 2017

did I have to make claims that stood opposite these *gadolim*? In a movement that so often touts"informed choice," I found that the more information I had the more paralyzed I was in understanding my connection to the divine.

In this Green is both part of the problem and the solution. There is no doubt in my mind that Green is of the same caliber as these other great minds, and I think he should be studied alongside them. As such, the weight of his opinions is certainly quite heavy. However, I find Green's radicalism refreshing, even though I disagree with parts of it: I feel that Greens liberalism would serve as an excellent contemporary counterpoint to the more traditional *gadolim* of the last 100 years that are studied. Allowing students to read a theological voice, Green's, that prompts an intellectual and emotional response while also speaking to the issues of today, could be productive. In closing, I would also point out that reading Green prompts a level of self-evaluation for students at HUC-JIR that reading other contemporary figures may not. Green is still the president at Hebrew College, and does oversee an alternative form of rabbinic education to our own. When I found myself agreeing with him, I often wondered whether or not I had made the right choice in my education. When I disagreed with him, I was thankful I could put him down and walk away. Rabbis ordained by HUC-JIR will be in conversation with those from Hebrew College for a long time to come, understanding the voice that shapes their education is important.

Conclusion

"The transition from sacrificial to verbal worship in Judaism seems as though it was an abrupt one… I mention this transition and its slowness because it occurs to me, as it may have to you, that we are at the edge of another such transition in our history. The great interest in meditation and inner silence in our day has attracted many of our most serious seekers. We are learning a great deal about this part of spiritual life from our dialogue with Buddhist and Hindu teachers, but we are also examining lost/forgotten inner Jewish resources on the value of inner silence. More books on the topic of "Jewish meditation" have been written in the past ten years than were written in the prior thousand! We seem to be moving toward an age in which prayer will transcend language, were the silent prayer of the heart will learn to be spoken directly without the aid of words."

- *Arthur Green, Ehyeh*

Green's work and its effect on my personal practice is a complex subject. I do not share his universalism nor do I feel fully comfortable with the image of God that he champions. It would not be fair to say that Green's God lacks agency, as Green would likely argue that his God is nothing *but* agency. All the world is the agency for Greens God, because, he would say, God is present in all things that act. Yet I cannot escape a belief in a God who acts, or at least has acted, from beyond time and space, a God that does occasionally plan for us, grant blessings, and intercedes on our behalf. This is a feeling that Green does not appear to share. Similarly, despite Green's suggestions that we should not be bothered that Torah is a construct of man, or his suggestion that it is the divine within us which sanctifies Torah since ritual and tradition have their own element of the holy, I maintain a belief that there is something inexplicable, divine, and perhaps even magical about

the words of Torah.

Greenss writings and his teaching that "All is One," has affected me greatly. It has become a watchword of mine during moments of anxiety. It has become a practice of mine, when I see someone begging or homeless, to make certain that I help them with some *tzedakah* if I can and to make eye contact if I cannot. Often, I force myself to repeat within my mind "I am no different than you, we are one," a phrase that is not always easy to believe when witnessing the damage of society on the individual. At other times, Green's teaching eludes me, but when faced with radical suffering, I find it easier to reach for radical compassion. I do not relate the preceding story to make myself "look better," but to credit to Green the strength of his words.

In a similar vein, when I say the Shema now I attempt to remember how very great, and very small, I am at the same time. It has been a comfort to discover that my long-standing prayer practice, of closing my eyes and focusing inwards on God, is not strange or heretical. I am attempting to climb the Sinai within and feel God who, I am more convinced than ever, is present. Additionally, my teaching, my sermons, and even my thinking has become infused with some of Green's language, the stories that I have read in his books, and his different names for God. I never expected to think of myself a mystic, yet the deeper I have delved into Jewish spirituality the more I have found it speaking to me. Perhaps most importantly, my exposure to Green, specifically his[130] universalism, has moved towards normalizing this concept for me. I do not need to agree fully with Green on this point, but I can accept that there are wise and learned teachers who do feel this way. My rabbinate is one which has been shaped for the better by my exposure to Greens teachings, and I am thankful for it.

[130] And Reb Zalmans

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