

Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition, by Arthur Green. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. 197 pp. \$26.00.

Arthur Green's book is one of the most profound interpretations of the Jewish tradition that I have read in the last decade, and it is certainly the most radical. Green, currently rector of the Rabbinical School at Hebrew College in Massachusetts, has also served as president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical School and as professor at the University of Pennsylvania and Brandeis University. For the last fifty years Green, one of the most significant Jewish theologians in America, has devoted his life to learning and teaching the classical Jewish sources, especially mystical and Hasidic sacred texts. This book is so rich in its use of major classical Jewish sources, including some of the most cryptic ones from the Jewish mystical tradition, and covers so many critical issues that in this short review I will focus only on his view of God, which to me seems to be the most controversial issue in this work and has serious implications for other core Jewish ideas.

Green argues that at the heart and center of Judaism the one core idea which Jews must continue to teach to the world is the universalist vision of Simeon ben Azzai for whom the Torah's most basic principle is that there is one God and that every human being is created in God's image. In Green's new vision of the Jewish tradition, this means that "*Being is One, and each person is God's unique image*" (p. 153; italics and capital in original). Green further claims that today we must expand Ben Azzai's message "to recognize the holiness of earth, air, and water as well as that of the human body and spirit, demanding that we care for the survival of other species alongside our devotion to humanity" (p. 154).

What does Green mean by "Being is One"? He calls himself a religious Jew, a religious humanist, and a mystical panentheist, one who believes that God is present throughout all existence, that "Being or Y-H-W-H underlies and unifies all that is. . . . When I refer to 'God,' I mean the inner force of existence itself, that of which one might say: 'Being *is*.' I refer to it as the 'One' because it is the single unifying substratum of all that is. . . . I choose to personify, to call Being by this ancient name 'God'" (pp. 18, 19).

For me the following deeply personal statement is most helpful in understanding Green's vision of Judaism: "I write as a mystic and a monist, one who believes in (and in rare and precious moments has come to know) the essential truth that there is only one Being and that all distinctions between self and other and between God, world, and soul represent partial betrayals of that truth. In my liturgical and communal religious life, however, I continue to speak this dualistic religious language. I do so because I remain a Westerner" (pp. 74–75). Nevertheless, Green considers it his task to educate and awaken us "to the reality of the single Truth" (p. 75).

Green, who also thinks of himself as a neo-Hasidic Jew, is aware that his radical idea of God will be problematic for many Jews and members of other faiths. In fact, Green's teaching that neither God nor soul are entities seems to have a strong affinity with the Buddhist idea of ultimate reality, but he comes to his vision by way of Jewish sources, especially ones from the Hasidic movement. The following statement by the Hasidic master Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Ger (1847–1904) has a strong affinity to Green's view of ultimate reality. The Gerer Rebbe stated in his classic work *Sefat Emet* that "The meaning of 'Y-H-W-H is one' is not that He is the only true God, negating other gods (though that too is true!). But the meaning is deeper than that: there is no being other than God. [This is true] even though it seems otherwise to most people. . . . Everything that exists in the world, spiritual and physical, is God Himself. . . ." (pp. 77–78).

It was the Zohar and the early Hasidic masters who saved Judaism for Green. He also singles out Hillel Zeitlin (1874–1942), the neo-Hasidic thinker who perished during the Holocaust, and Green’s beloved teacher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel as being profound influences on his life.

In the final chapter of his book, Green devotes a number of pages to Heschel, who first set Green on his quest for a new Jewish theology while he was Heschel’s student at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Throughout the book we see Heschel’s influence, especially Heschel’s teaching of our need to respond with wonder and radical amazement to the grandeur of nature. Other themes in Green’s book that are central in Heschel’s teaching are Heschel’s political activism and his deep commitment to interfaith dialogue as a path to seeing holiness in the lives of members of different faiths. And like many of Heschel’s books, Green’s book is addressed not only to Jews but also to non-Jews. Unlike Heschel, however, Green is not able to accept a personalist view of God, even though, like Heschel, Green affirms that “there is a God who seeks us out. The inner One, Y-H-W-H inseparable from existence itself, still wants to know where I am. . . . The divine voice, however transverbally we may understand that phrase, still makes a demand of each of us, a unique demand of each unique person” (pp. 159–160). Here it sounds like Green is presenting us with a personalist view of God, much like Heschel’s, but Green explains that such language is merely symbolic.

Readers may be surprised to learn that, in spite of Green’s radical Jewish theology, he calls for Jews to be very attentive to follow the commandments, especially honoring the Sabbath and traditional Jewish prayer. For Green, the need for prayer comes from our experience of wonder, beauty, and radical amazement and of seeing life as a gift. For him, radical theology and traditional Jewish practice are not incompatible. He finds support for such a vision when he points out in an earlier publication that there were Hasidic masters who were panentheistic and addressed God in Yiddish as *tateh in himl*, which means “father in heaven,” and at the same time described God as “the cosmic Nothing that underlies all forms of being.”

This is Green’s most personal book, and I must respond to it from my own perspective. Heschel stated that a Jew is a person “for whom God is a challenge” and in a recent article Green says that Heschel wanted Jews to talk “both *to* God and *about* God.” It would be very difficult for me to talk to and be challenged by a monistic God. As a student at a traditional yeshiva in my youth and later as Heschel’s student, I find the traditional Jewish idea of a personal God more compelling and satisfying, in spite of all the problems that it presents to me as a Holocaust survivor. When Green confronted the Holocaust as a young man, he gave up on a personal God.

But Green’s purpose is not to transform my or any other person’s traditional view of God, but to show the beauty of the Jewish tradition to many Jews and non-Jews who have a deep hunger for faith, yet cannot accept a personal God. I have learned a great deal from this book by an outstanding Jewish scholar who has devoted his life to seeking God and truth, and I recommend it to everyone seeking to deepen their spirituality, especially to the many Jews who have difficulty with a theistic God and have turned to Asian religious traditions, most notably to Buddhism. I believe that this book, with its stress on the mystical dimension of Judaism, has the potential to bring them home to their own tradition.

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