

Ely E. Pilchik
American Federation of Jewish Robbis

Spiritual Resources: Contemporary Problems in Judaism

1. Historical background

The spiritual resources of Judaism date back to Abraham the patriarch, celebrated in the book of Genesis. He was the first to bear the name "Ivri"—"The Hebrew" (Gen 14:13). Abraham is regarded as the father of the Hebrew people. He came from the city of Ur in Mesopotamia. Nehemiah tells us: "You are Adonay, the God who chose Abram and brought him forth from Ur of the Chaldees and gave him the name Abraham (meaning 'father of a multitude') (9:7)." The Archaeologists and students of near-eastern antiquity would date Abraham at around 1935 B.C.¹

The spiritual resources of Judaism are founded in the *Torah*—the teaching, the Law—the five books of Moses, regarded by traditional Jews as the literal word of God, recorded by Moses, his servant.

The scientifically, historically-oriented students of Hebrew scripture conclude that the *Torah* is a collection of teachings by God-inspired teachers over a period of some 800 years, or so commencing in 1200 B.C. and ending around 450 B.C., when the *Torah* was completed by the last series of priestly editors. It was, then, during the period of Ezra and Nehemiah that the divine Word was given: "All which I command you this day shall you heed to do. You shall not add thereto nor diminish therefrom (Deut 13:1).

The spiritual resources of Judaism are augmented by the second section of the Trilogy of Hebrew Scripture, the prophets. Historically they range from Nathan accusing King David of violating God's moral

1. Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1946).

law around the year 1000 B.C. through Amos in 750 B.C. along with Hoseah and Isaiah (the 8th century prophets), on through Jeremiah (625-580), Ezekiel (593-573), Deutero-Isaiah (538-530), Trito-Isaiah, the author of the suffering-servant dialogue in Isaiah 53 (about 485), through Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the last of the prophets around the year 400 B.C.

The spiritual resources of Judaism in their first major phase—the Hebrew Bible—are completed in the “Ketubim”, the writings, comprising the Psalms (ranging from 1200 to 100 B.C.), the Proverbs, Job (judged to have been composed anywhere between 500 and 250) and the lesser Anthologies and Historical books. Hebrew scripture was completed around 150 B.C. and canonized after the Roman destruction of Judea and Jerusalem in 70 C.E. at Jammia (between 70-90 of our era). This is the “Grund”, the foundation of spiritual heritage of Judaism: *Torah*, prophets, writings, read through annually on Sabbaths, Mondays and Thursdays, festivals and high holy days, unto this day in the synagogue.

The spiritual resources of Judaism do not end with the creation and promulgation and canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Explanation, expatiation, and elaboration of the Scriptural word of God had begun long before its canonization. In the third century before our era teachers arose in the holy land and in Babylonia. They formed academies and began learning and teaching how human beings shall walk this earth in accordance with God’s will. A chain of unbroken tradition was established as expressed in this prefatory word of the talmudic tractate *abot* (“Ethics of the Fathers”):

“Moses received *Torah* from Sinai and handed it down to Joshua. Joshua handed it down to the elders, the elders handed it down to the prophets, the prophets handed it down to the men of the great Synagogue”

Then a series of teachers (the Hebrew term is *Rar* or *Rabbi*) are mentioned with their teachings the most prominent of whom perhaps is Hillel—a contemporary, we believe, of Jesus of Nazareth. These teachers, known as the “Tannaim” over some 400 years (200 B.C.-200 C.E. created the *Mishnah*—the post-biblical code of Jewish law founded on the Hebrew Scriptures, essentially on the *Torah*.

The spiritual resources of Judaism include the six orders of the *Mishnah*, the code Juris of Judaism: 1) seeds, 2) seasons, 3) women, 4) damages, 5) hallowed things, 6) ritually pure things.²

The spiritual resources of Judaism do not end with the *Mishnah*, permanently fixed and edited by Rabbi Judah the patriarch around 215 C.E. the school of teachers (Rabbis) in Babylon and, simultaneously, the school of Rabbis in the holy land known as the Amoraim studied and discussed this *Mishnah*, which in itself was a study and discussion of the *Torah* of Moses, for centuries. The palestinian teachers produced the *Jerusalem Talmud*,³ completed around 525 C.E. Those in the diaspora produced the *Babylonian Talmud*, completed around 700 C.E. *Mishnah* and *Talmud* have been studied continually through the centuries in the schools of Judaism unto this day, even as *Torah*, prophets, and writings, the Hebrew Scriptures have been read and studied in the synagogues unto our day. These are the foundations of the spiritual resources of Judaism.

Upon them have been built super-structures of learning. The philosophies of Moses Maimonides, Ibn Gabirol, Yehuda Halevi in the 12th and 13th century Spain; the philosophies of Moses Mendelsohn, Herman Cohen, Martin Buber in the 18th and 19th and 20th century Germany; the philosophies of Mordecai Kaplan, Abraham Heschel and their disciples in the U.S.; the philosophies of Harov Kook and his disciples in Israel in our own times.

The spiritual resources of Judaism must include the mysticism of the early Rabbis, the medieval teachers, Moses de Leon, author of the *Zohar*, Isaac Luria the Kabbalist, and the Chasidim of Safed and Eastern Europe (the Ba'al Shem Tov of the 18th century), through the years.

The spiritual resources of Judaism constitute a massive library of Scripture, law, lore, metaphysics, mysticism and every form of human expression. Serious students of Judaism have great difficulty getting

-
2. A superb translation of the *Mishnah* is available in English, thanks to the brilliant labours of a Canon, Herbert Danby of St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem, published by Oxford University Press, originally in 1933.
 3. The *Talmud*, consisting of 63 Tractatus, is a literary confluence of two streams of teaching: 1) *Agadah*—The telling, the lore and 2) *Halachah*—The walking (in God's way), the Law.

through these sources in the 80 to 120 years allotted to them by a compassionate creator.

2. Contemporary Relevance

Now what has this vast library of spirituality to say to us about our contemporary problems in this shattering, exasperating, brutal, world? Let us begin with the creation of the human being on this planet, the only home for living beings in this vast universe of trillions upon trillions of galaxies with their billions of celestial entities.

The *Torah* opens by telling us that an immanent and transcendental God created the heavens (the cosmos) and the land (the planet earth). It makes clear that the creator created these not to be destroyed but to be inhabited by living beings. In the 27th verse of its first chapter the *Torah* states: "And God created the human being in His image, in the image of God did He create him; male and female did He create them."

The *Talmud* in Tractate Sanhedrin (*Mishnah* 4:5) takes up this seminal verse in the Genesis and states: "A single human being was originally created to tell us that if any person causes a single life to perish, scripture charges that person with having caused the whole world to perish. And if any person saves a single human being scripture credits that person with having saved the whole world.

Furthermore, a single human being was originally created for the sake of peace within the human family; that none should say to a neighbour, 'my father was greater than your father'.

Furthermore, a single human being was originally created to proclaim the greatness of God; for humans stamp many coins with a single seal and they are identical, but the King of kings, the Holy one, blessed is He, has stamped every human being with the seal of the original human, yet each of them is unique. Therefore, everyone must say: For my own sake was the world created"

Beyond this preface exalting life and its highest form, the human being, what have the spiritual resources of Judaism to offer mankind on this good earth in the light of our contemporary problems?

By contemporary problems we mean this “foreground with background” (A. N. Whitehead) of this post-modern world when we are perplexed and in quest of an orientation of the human situation in the seemingly ever-expanding universe. A universe, which we are told, consists of atoms and their various constituents which are not substantive nor permanent but energy waves of microcosmic relationships. There is no material—all is immaterial. Not only immaterial, impermanent, and according to quantum physics, indeterminate. What then, who then, wither then, are we created in God’s image afloat in his created universe?

It was Alfred North Whitehead, way back in 1938 writing his work *Modes of Thought*, who gave us a clue: “At the base of our existence is the sense of worth . . . It is the sense of existence for its own sake . . . of existence with its own character . . . (p. 146).” There is reality. Reality consists of ourselves, others, and the whole—this is the sense of deity, “the intuition of holiness”. As we experience the whole, however immaterial, impermanent, and indeterminate, as long as we experience the whole of which we are part and to which we cling, we experience the reality of God.

Reformulations of the human view of God are not extraordinary in history. The spiritual resources of Judaism rooted in the *Torah* branch out and yield foliage and fruit in the prophetic message of ethical monotheism. The relationality suffusing modern science, especially physics, is central in the faith of the prophets of Israel. Martin Buber taught us (in his essay “On Judaism,” the *Saturday Review of Literature* Oct. 2, 1968): “The prophetic idea of God is an expression of the human longing for unity.” The Deuteronomic command “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God” can have no meaning unless it directs the human *thou* to identification with the one who is the unity of all that is, the universal I.

The prophetic message gives us humans freedom to choose. Deuteronomy, promulgated around 620 B.C. is already deeply saturated with the message of the 9th century prophets, when it calls upon mankind to “choose life!” by living ethically. Deuteronomy thus recapitulates the challenges of Amos, Hosea and I Isaiah.

With free choice comes the chance of tragedy: “All free creatures are more or less dangerous, and the most free is man.” Levi Olan

writes: "Born to freedom, man is born to tragedy, but he is born also to opportunity—opportunities for existence outweigh its risks and life becomes essentially good".⁴

Deutero-Isaiah insisted that God's ultimate judgement on the world is to save it for His own sake: "A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not quench, He will faithfully bring forth justice" (47:3).

The spiritual resources of Judaism radiated by the message of the prophets of Israel focus primarily on God's concern for human beings. Abraham J. Heschel, in his work on "the prophets" (1962) insists that, according to the prophetic message, the reality of God is experienced in pathos rather than power: "The prophets proclaim not God's justice, but His pathos . . . concern for the world are the ethics of God." The prophets of Israel poured out their hearts, yea, their lives in the quest for the reunion of the separated parts.

3. Conclusion

Our contemporary problems are complex and multiple. As our world became smaller and denser in population its people became more suspicious, more frightened, more hostile. Science tells us that the universe is immaterial; yet we humans wax more and more materialistic in our aims and pursuits. The universe, science tells us is one, an integrative whole; yet we proceed to fragmentize, to disorganize, to isolate. The sense of world community, national community, neighbourhood community, family community seems to be running down; numbing entropy prevails over the centrifugal progresses: the parts fly from the whole, and technology, high-technology, the machine, the computer, artificial intelligence, if you will, dominates the world's stage. Not the brain but the chip, not the human but the robot, not the hand but the switch—how we of flesh and blood seem to be falling—in self-esteem, in the sense of usefulness, in the hope for the morrow. And waiting in ambush is the Bomb—the totally destructive Bomb—capable of returning the entire planet to its gaseous origins.

4. Levi Olan, "The Prophetic Faith in a Secular Age" *Journal of Reform Judaism*, Spring 1979.

The spiritual resources of Judaism, ancient and modern, demand human recognition of God's being and God's concentration on human being. As they marched into the Gas-chambers the hundreds of thousands innocent condemned, well-founded in the spiritual resources of Judaism intoned "*Ani Ma'Amin*—I believe, with perfect faith that the Almighty will send salvation—and even though He may delay, yet I believe".

The spiritual resources of Judaism then and now exalt the human being and exhort him and her to muster the courage and the intelligence—contemporary problems however overwhelming notwithstanding—to choose life and to hasten to make this planet, the human home, safe for living.

The spiritual resources of Judaism remind us that in the hour of ultimate judgment the individual facing the supreme justice is required to answer: "*Tzipita Le'Yeshuah*—did you hope for salvation?"

The spiritual resources of Judaism, sparked by the prophetic imperative, then and now, ask: "What is good? What does God demand of you?" And they answer: "To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8).