Introduction

Rabbi Arthur Green (b. 1941) is a theologian, professor of Jewish mysticism, and the teacher of two generations of American rabbis and scholars. Yet above all he is, by his own description, a spiritual seeker. Green has devoted over five decades to developing a vibrant new expression of Judaism that is “all about challenge and response, one that by definition has to change and grow in each generation and even in the course of single lives.” Green argues that without such growth Judaism will not survive the confrontation with modernity and postmodernity. Religious traditions must be reinterpreted and reframed in our day if they are to remain a compelling voice for new generations.

The unique challenges facing contemporary Jews include modern science and theories of evolution, biblical criticism, the Holocaust, the reestablishment of a Jewish state, life in an open democracy, impending ecological disaster, and the morally bankrupt materialism of our society. Meeting these challenges with authenticity and integrity may at times demand that we radically reinterpret the Judaism we have inherited from very different eras, but confronting these issues also requires us to listen carefully to the wisdom and vitality embedded in our tradition. The legacy of Jewish learning must be reshaped for contemporary Jews, but tradition’s authentic voice should also challenge and inspire us. As a contemporary reinterpreter of Jewish tradition, Green freely acknowledges that he himself is constantly being shaped and challenged by the traditional texts with which he is working.

Green’s theology is grounded in the Jewish mystical tradition. More specifically, he has described his approach as “neo-Hasidic.” This means that Green draws particular inspiration from Hasidic texts but rejects the strictures of living in a traditional Hasidic community, including its dismissal.

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of Western education and the critical study of Judaism. Inspired more by
the textual sources of early Hasidism than by contemporary Hasidim, he
feels free to engage with those teachings somewhat selectively. He values
the teachings of Kabbalah and Hasidism as holding deep insights into
the human psyche and spiritual life, but does not look to them for any lit-
eral sense of metaphysical or cosmological truth. He rejects elements of
the mystical tradition, such as the degradation of non-Jews or the disen-
franchisement of women, which he feels conflict with his morality. Green
understands that these aspects of Jewish mysticism reflect the historical
contexts in which these texts were written, and insists that the modern
seeker need not accept them whole cloth. This selective reading allows
for the possibility of rediscovering the beauty and potential contemporary
relevance of the sources. The teachings of Jewish mysticism, argues Green,
give us access to some of the deepest wellsprings of human creativity and
spirituality, and point toward a mysterious, elusive reality within them
that we humans call by the name Y-H-W-H, or “God.” A modern renewal of
Judaism can flow forth only from these.

Green knows that he lives in an age of seekers. Often confronted by
superficial manifestations of Judaism without any deep roots in our
authentic spiritual language, many of his generation and those he teaches
have turned to other religious traditions for wisdom and guidance. Many
others have turned away from religion entirely. This was true in the 1960s
and 1970s, and this sense of spiritual emptiness in much of what passes for
liberal Judaism has remained a defining element of contemporary Jewish
life into the twenty-first century. Answering this call, Green has dedicated
his life to developing an authentic Jewish spirituality that is at once boldly
creative and deeply grounded in tradition.

Biography and Career

Arthur Green was born into a secular Jewish family and raised in an eth-
nically diverse neighborhood of Newark, New Jersey. Green’s mother died
when he was eleven, an event that he would later identify as crucial to his
entire biography. His maternal grandparents, who were immigrants from
Eastern Europe, lived nearby. As a link to the intensely Jewish, Yiddish-
speaking cultural milieu of Europe, they were to have an important influ-
ence on him. Despite the objections of his militantly atheistic father, Green
attended Hebrew school and Camp Ramah, where he developed excellent
Hebrew skills and fluency in reading Jewish texts. He became attracted to
religion in early adolescence and increasingly took on a strict level of ritual