Who Is Writing This Book?

The author of this book is a Jewish seeker. I have been reading, studying, writing, and teaching theology to Jews—including many present and future rabbis—for nearly half a century. Yet I still think of myself primarily as a seeker. That means living in pursuit of an ever-present yet ever-elusive God, the One of Whom Scripture says: “Seek His face, always” (Ps. 105:4). There is no end to such seeking. But it also means questing after truth, or at least my truth, one that wells up from my own life experience and feels authentic to who I am, as person and as Jew. Personal and intellectual honesty are essential to my life as a seeker; I try not to permit them to be overwhelmed by traditional claims or by emotional need. In this I am a longtime disciple of Rabbi Bunem of Przysucha who taught: “Do not deceive anybody (Lev. 25:17)—not even yourself!” These two realities, being a God seeker and a truth seeker, might seem to go hand in hand. Supposedly God is truth, after all. But in my case the simultaneous quest for both God and truth presents a terrible yet wonderful conflict. It is this conflict, and my ongoing attempt to resolve it, that the book you have just opened is all about.

I have understood since childhood that I am a deeply religious person, one easily moved by the power of sacred language, rites, and symbols. Through them I am sometimes able to enter into states of inner openness to a nameless and transcendent presence, that which I choose to call “God.” Raised in a Jewish atheist household, I was powerfully attracted to the synagogue by the time I was seven or eight years old. The grandeur and mystery of its liturgy, the drama of its sacred calendar, and the infinite beauty of the Hebrew language and its classical literature all drew me in and have never ceased to fascinate me.

* This chapter was first published in Radical Judaism by Arthur Green (pp. 1–33). Copyright © 2010 by Yale University Press. Reprinted with permission.

1 All biblical translations are my own.
At the same time, I have long known that I am not a “believer” in the conventional Jewish or Western sense. I simply do not 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. Indeed, I do not know that such an “outside” or “beyond” exists. Challenges to conventional theological views, as well as to all the apologetic reformulations that seek to save them, came at me rather hard at the end of adolescence. I had chosen the religious life on my own, becoming quite fully (and somewhat compulsively) observant as an adolescent. But the regimen of Orthodox practice I had adopted, at the cost of terrible family battles, came crashing down during my college years, when I accepted that its theological underpinnings had been rooted in fantasy and denial of reality.

The challenges came from two directions: theodicy and critical history. The former included both personal loss (my mother died when I was eleven, and I had spent much of adolescence mourning her and struggling with that loss) and the fact of being a Jew in the immediate post-Holocaust generation. I remember the day my beloved East European grandfather found out just what had happened to the Jews of his town, as I recall my mother and grandmother going through newspaper lists of “relatives sought” in the early postwar years. These experiences, both personal and collective, made it clear to me that I could affirm neither particular providence nor a God who governed history. The God of childhood dreams, the One who could “make it all better” and show that life was indeed fair after all, was gone. My initiation into adulthood meant full acceptance of the arbitrariness of fate, including the finality of death.

At about the same time, I was exposed to Jewish scholarship, including the critical reading of the Hebrew Bible and its history. This exciting intellectual enterprise, which gripped my imagination, also undermined the residue of faith I had in Scripture as revealed. The text was edited, composed of many sources. Each of these represented a particular human community or interest group. What, then, was left of revelation? Where was the authority of Scripture, if the text was merely human? I struggled with what it could mean to claim that God had “given us His Torah” when the Torah text itself seemed to “evaporate” into so many documents. Without that, I had no basis for believing in a God who had commanded specific forms of religious behavior. (This seemed to be the essential “payoff” question in Judaism.) So the pillars of naive faith had given way, and its edifice lay in ruins. I had no answers to the great questions around which my religious life had been constructed.