

Matthew Gindin

I am YHVH and there is none else;

Beside Me, there is no god.

I will strengthen you, though you have not known Me,

So that they may know, from east to west,

That there is none but Me.

I am YHVH and there is none else,

I form light and create darkness,

I make good and create evil—

I YHVH do all these things.

Isaiah 45:5-7

Isaiah (c. 8th century BCE) is the first Jewish writer to affirm at length and explicitly that YHVH is the only God, and the creator and overseer of all things. Traditionally, though, Judaism has had no trouble affirming an intense ethical dualism: arguably Judaism is the most focused on ethics and action of the great world religions, and is elaborately structured around good/bad, life/death, pure/impure, allowed/forbidden, obligated/fulfilled. As Moses said:

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life...”

Deuteronomy 30:19

This mosaic of binaries has been essential to Jewish life for at least 2,000 years, even as theologically Jewish mystics and Rabbis embraced a more and more thorough-going nondualism (or at least a position on the spectrum monism/nondualism/pantheism/panentheism/monergism).

Eventually, one could argue, this came to a head in the 18th century Hasidic movement. Hasidim were accused of identifying God with the impure and the inappropriate (as in the Ba'al Shem Tov's sexual metaphors) and of disregarding halacha (Jewish law) in favour of anarchy and excessive inwardness (some Hasidim waited to pray until they were spiritually prepared, even if this meant praying past the time Jewish law dictated).

Mary-Jane Rubinsteain, in her erudite and fascinating *Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds, Monsters* points out that everywhere Pantheism broke out between the 18th and 20th centuries, it tended to elicit fear and intense resistance among the religious and cultural establishment. She says that it elicited fear of anarchy, contagion, and monstrosity. She quotes Michel Foucault:

The monster is essentially a mixture. It is a mixture of two realms, the animal and the human ... of two species ... of two individuals ... of two sexes ... of life and death.... Finally, it is a mixture of forms.... the transgression of natural limits, the transgression of classifications, of the table, and of the law as table: this is actually what is involved in monstrosity.

Spinoza

Spinoza has been, for centuries, the poster-boy– and whipping-boy– for pantheism, which is basically theism in its most nondual form. Rubinstein postulates that Pantheism was so threatening because of the threat it instinctively posed to hierarchies and boundaries of gender; class and morality. As Rubinstein writes,

When Spinoza tells us that God is the world, then, he is mixing up traits that any sane philosophy would keep separate, transgressing the law of the table. This is what Bayle [massively popular at the time Protestant theologian and philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647–1706)] means when he repeatedly calls Spinoza’s philosophy “monstrous”; what kind of divinity could ever be material? After all, Bayle reminds us, matter is “the vilest of all beings ... the theater of all sorts of changes, the battleground of contrary charges, the subject of all corruptions and all generations, in a word, the being whose nature is most incompatible with the immutability of God.” By mixing the spiritual and the material, Spinoza therefore

produces “the most monstrous hypothesis that could be imagined, the most absurd, and the most diametrically opposed to the most evident notions of our mind.”

In addition to the repeated charges of monstrosity, Bayle dubs Spinoza’s teachings “absurd,” “horrible,” and “vile”; his ethics “an execrable abomination,” his metaphysics “poppycock,” and his Theological-Political Treatise a “pernicious and detestable book.” Such insults are hardly limited to Bayle; a contemporary detractor wrote that the Treatise had been “forged in Hell by a renegade Jew and the Devil.” And the source of this abomination, the professed identity of spirit and matter, God and nature, is the position that yet another anti-Spinozist named Jacques de la Faye will derisively name pantheism.

Further on, quoting an Anglican divine in New England named Nathaniel Smith Richardson (circa 1849):

Richardson can see why pantheism has swept up the young and unchurched: “there is a generosity about it,” he writes, “and a kindliness, that is captivating.” The kindly generosity of pantheism, of course, is its attribution of godliness to all things—its coloring the whole world divine “as if it bore in its hand the wand of an enchanter.... It is a gorgeous vision,” the anti-pantheist admits, “and no wonder that souls craving for rest and finding none, should gladly yield themselves to its bewitching power.”

Rubinstein notes the hint of “feminine enchantress” added to Pantheism’s “appalling power” here, and I would not also the hint of witchery.

Hasidim

Pantheism- and the associated fear of the dissolution of boundaries and binaries- seems to be part of the reaction to the early Hasidim as well. The Ba'al Shem Tov emphasized *panentheism*- the doctrine that all is God, but God is more than the All- and also emphasized the real, felt connection with God over external ritual obedience. This- as well as the lightning speed with which the popularity of him and his disciples grew- provoked hostility and concern among other Orthodox Jews, who moved to put the Hasidim in *cherem*- under ban (as Spinoza had been). After the popular early Hasidic pamphlet, *Tzava'at Harivash*, was released, objections were raised by the Mitnagdim- the "opponents", as they came to be known by Hasidim, or "Litvaks" as they called themselves, for their loyalty to the non Hasidic Lithuanian based Orthodoxy.

The Litvaks issued condemnations, most or all of which include distortions of Hasidic teachings. They said that the Hasidic claim that the Divine life-force is vested in all beings, including animals, is blasphemy, and to say that everything happening to humans is by Divine Providence is to justify all wrongdoing and to exempt all wrong-doers from punishment. So here they object to Panentheism (God is the universe, but more than the universe) and Monergism (God is the ultimate agent of all actions). Further, to say that in prayer one becomes unified with God, some Mitnagdim said, is a "worthless illusion" and it is blasphemous to state that the Shechinah is vested in all human beings. Now in fact all of these things are said in the Kabbalah, so this is a very conservative reaction.

Mitnagdim also accused the *Tzava'at Harivash* of denigrating Torah and Torah-study and encouraging emotionality and self-indulgence because of Hasidic teachings of direct access to

God through prayer, not just Torah mastery and intellectual contemplation. They saw implications in Hasidic doctrines that legal observance was not the ultimate thing, maybe even just a means to an end— instead of an embodiment of God’s will to be done for its own sake.

Many of these criticisms also appear in the accusations before the Czarist regime against the Alter Rebbe, R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad, who was arrested by the Russian police after being “informed on” by Mitnagdim. After being held for a while he was released, and the date of his release became an annual festival for Chabad Hasidim. According to the stories, when asked by an interrogator why he was not afraid, the Alter Rebbe said, “You believe in one world (i.e. no life after death) and many gods (i.e. worldly idols like money, power, the state) but I believe in two worlds and only one God.”

When R. Shneur Zalman was about to die, on Saturday evening after Havdalah [the ritual marking the end of Shabbat], a few moments before he gave his soul to eternal life.....he asked one of his grandchildren, “Do you see the beam in the ceiling?” And his grandson was surprised and didn’t know how to respond.

So R. Zalman said to his grandson, “Believe me that I do not see it; all I see is the Divine Force, which enlivens everything material, and except for that, I do not see anything.”

-Sefer HaHistalkut

Binaries

The simple answer to the question of binaries in Judaism is that nondual Judaism does not undo the binaries of good/evil, pure/impure, forbidden/permitted, etc, it just undoes the boundary godly/ungodly or divine/non-divine.

That could be, but there are hints of nondual radiation, or binary dissolution, that remain beyond that and are perhaps worth interrogating.

The first locus would be surrounding the issue of *access to YHVH*. Primal Judaism was very clear that any Jew has direct access to YHVH, as the Tanakh makes clear many times. Later Judaism, though, tended to emphasize that prophets– and later, mystics– had special access to God, and Rabbis had special access to Torah. For mainstream Judaism, I think it's fair to say, the Torah became the main way of access to God- access to God's will and intellect. This meant that scholar-Rabbis had the most access to God, and by way of their interpretations of Jewish law, could in effect speak with the voice of God.

Many Hasidic stories poke at this paradigm. In one some Litvaks challenge a Rebbe to answer a very difficult legal question, and he does, giving the same answer their Rav does to a tee. “Did you read his t'shuvot (legal responsa)? Or the s'farim (books) that the Rav studies?” they ask. “No,” he says. “Where did you get this answer, then?” they ask and he says, “From the same place the Rav did.” The Hasidim explain that he meant from the sefira of binah- the divine energy of understanding. The Rebbe goes direct.

In another story, it is the Days of Awe and a Rabbi leads his conversation in prayer, but feels that they cannot penetrate the gates of heaven. A young boy who does not even know his aleph-bet picks up his flute and plays as hard as can to join the prayer, and the gates open. In this story it is sincerity that provides access, and not even Torah, but prayer. The Hasidim in general, with some exceptions, taught that prayer is actually higher than Torah.

So what does it mean if anyone can access God? It questions the authority of Rabbis, obviously, which is no doubt one of the reasons the most powerful and brilliant of the Litvak Rabbis excommunicated the Hasidim. In point of historical fact, the Hasidic Rebbes would ultimately replace the hierarchies of intellect with the hierarchies of Tzaddik-hood (a mystical hierarchy). As Rebbe Nachman would warn, “The Evil One does not have time to go about corrupting every soul, so instead he simply places a *tzaddik* here and a *tzaddik* there.”

The original impulse, though, was surely both nondualizing and democratizing. It should be remembered that the early Hasidim also taught that Torah could be found everywhere, in everything, and even in the songs and jokes of gentiles. When that Torah is discovered then the amount of Torah in the world increases, so this is in effect ongoing revelation, democratizing Sinai.

From the time of the Talmud the distinction between “good” and “bad” was gently poked at. In Bavli Berachot the Rabbis say that one who really understands God will bless everything that happens to them, saying *baruch hatov vehemetiv- blessed is the one who is good and does good*

in both pleasure and suffering, fortune and calamity. This attitude was certainly embraced by Hasidim.

Some of the Hasidim- most notably the Ishbitzer Rebbe, Mordecai Yosef Leiner (1801-1854), wrote that God acts also in the sin of human beings, embracing a nondual understanding of providence.

So the tendency of Hasidic thought is towards democratizing access to God and revelation of Torah, questioning the binary of good event/bad event and of godly/ungodly, and embracing God as the agent behind all actions, even to the extent of softening the binary sin/good deed. They even gently poke at the distinction Jewish/gentile on occasion, affirming God's presence (if cloaked) in gentile culture. That said, it would not be until the arrival of neo-Hasidism outside of an Orthodox context when there would be religious Jews willing to radically open up Torah to anyone, democratize divinity, and recognize the full presence of God in non-Jewish religions and culture.

Reb Zalman is arguably the principle architect of these evolutions of Jewish doctrine and praxis. He argued that Jewish tradition moved through regular paradigm shifts, and that right now it has been moving through a major one which includes the embrace of evolving Halakha (Jewish law), feminism, deep ecology, and deep ecumenicism (which recognizes the presence of God in other religions and is willing to break bread with them on their terms- even to practice their practices).

What about gender?

If the fear of pantheism/nonduality is related to a fear of the loss of binaries such as high/low, male/female, etc then does Hasidic or neo-Hasidic Judaism nudge at the stringent gender binary/hierarchy in traditional Judaism? Well, in fact it did- a little. There were rare cases of female Tzadekkets/Rebbe'im, and Rebbe Nachman, for instance, treated his daughters like authentic mystical disciples and called one of them a prophetess. Yet generally there was little effect, and what effect there was dissipated quickly.

Meanwhile, in non-Orthodox Judaism, around a hundred years ago women began being ordained, and homosexuality and then transgendered rights were gradually accepted, and are now affirmed by every non-Orthodox movement (so 70-80% of Jews, more or less). The pattern here is very clear: the less allegiance there was to the traditional techniques of Jewish legal decision making and to Rabbinic authority, the faster changes were embraced. In other words, there was an inversion relationship between the acceptance of traditional Rabbinic authority and willingness to change. The issue was not theological.

In the last 3-4 decades not only has there been a rapid growth in women Rabbis and women-written religious literature in what I would like to call Majority Judaism, there has also been a growth in feminized religious language and God-language. Nonbinary religious language is possible, but very difficult due to the thoroughly gendered nature of Hebrew (like French). Maybe we should all start speaking Chinese!

One issue that has remained very gendered in Canada, despite the embrace of trans and queer rights, is the issue of the lineal descent of Jewish identity. Judaism, as a tribal religion, accepts Jewish identity on the basis of birth or initiation (“conversion”). Primal Judaism saw Jewish identity as primarily patrilineal (through the father) but changed in the time of the Talmud to be matrilineal, likely due to the rape of Jewish women during the Roman persecutions and afterwards. Though liberal Jews in the US generally accept patrilineal descent, liberal Canadian Jews generally don’t. Aside from the questionable basis for this in tradition and the stress it causes those in interfaith marriages or who have a Jewish father and identify as Jewish (like, you know, Joseph’s two sons Ephraim and Manasseh, who everyone blesses their children to be like every Shabbat, and whose mother was the daughter of an Egyptian priest, but I digress) - the deeper question these days is, why are we talking about gender at all? If we accept that one parent can make one Jewish, why does it matter what gender they are?

The collision of neo-Hasidic nonduality and post-enlightenment, progressive politics has yielded, in the Jewish Renewal movement and elsewhere, a democratization of access to God, study and revelation of Torah, and shaping of the Jewish tradition, including across gender lines. One interesting transgender theologian, Joy Ladin, has recently written, in *The Soul of A Stranger: Torah From A Transgender Perspective* about a different interaction between transgendered experience and theology:

“Torah doesn't tell us what being created in the image of God means, or explain how human beings are similar to the invisible, disembodied, time- and space-transcending Creator of the Universe. That, to me, is the point of reading God and the Torah from a transgender perspective:

to better understand the kinship between humanity and the inhuman, bodiless God in whose image we are created, a God who does not fit any of the categories through which human beings define ourselves and one another.”

Here it is God’s transcendence of all categories, including gender, which connects him in spiritual sympathy to human “strangers” outside of traditional categories. The uncategorizability of God is a doctrine as old as Maimonides, as we have seen, and resonates with those who would say that since God is in all categories God is in none (or one: that of God).

Lastly, a reminder from The Kotzker Rebbe, a fierce and confrontational teacher who was known for the existentialist nature of his teachings and their focus on truthfulness of thought, word and deed. A famous story about the Kotzker relates that he once asked his disciples where God is. “Everywhere,” a disciple answered, giving the typical Hasidic answer.

“No,” the Kotzker said. “God is where you let him in.”