



SEEING AND SEEING THROUGH: An Approach to Myth, Metaphor, and Meaning

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It has been decades since Mordecai Kaplan and his original disciples made their celebrated changes in the wording of Jewish prayers. Nevertheless, Reconstructionists continue to debate whether those changes were necessary and whether they ought to be retained.¹ That discussion can be enriched with a deeper appreciation of the ways that metaphor and prayer function.

The Traditional Function of Prayer

Most Jews who lived in traditional, pre-modern society had a multi-faceted relationship to the symbols of Jewish civilization. That relationship was basically unconscious. Jews lived in an all-embracing Jewish culture that permeated every aspect of their lives. When they davened, the metaphors of the liturgy were not so much dogmatic affirmations of belief as they were ritual enactments of the root metaphors on which their entire view of the world rested.

By reciting passages about the messiah, for example, Jews gave voice to their personal and communal yearning for redemption. Certainly, the specific hopes of Jews differed from era to era and from place to place. But the expression of those hopes became fixed in traditional liturgical images that the whole community shared. The prayer book did not develop as a conscious catechism of doctrine; it was rather a book of sacred images that both formed the consciousness of Jews and was itself re-formed by their experiences and insights.

This natural interplay ended

after 1648, as Orthodoxy emerged as a self-conscious movement that stood firmly against the contemporary currents of the modern age. A defensive literalism developed towards the images of the prayers, and dogmatic interpretation rendered our liturgical poetry prosaic. In response to the Orthodox challenge, liberal Judaism developed its own literalist approach to metaphor in liturgy. Because the Orthodox insist that the entirety of the Torah was given by God to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, liberal Judaism, which denies the historical accuracy of the biblical account, has responded by changing the liturgical words that the Orthodox literally affirm.

In truth, the images of prayer do not necessarily demand that kind of literal affirmation. Contemporary study of the dynamics of prayer indicates that it is the imagery of prayer, rather than a doctrinal reading, that engages us, causing us to resonate with religious truth. This contemporary understanding of myth and metaphor leads us to abandon our liberal literalism and offers us a way to vivify our intellectual, emotional, and spiritual experience of prayer.

The Way of Metaphor

If Judaism is to be meaningful, we must be able to use its symbols to make connections with our ongoing, living, ultimate concerns. As our symbols evoke a multiplicity of associations and resonances, we must learn to allow them to carry us to meaning. Not only should we examine which images our Juda-



ism must have; we should also explore *how* we experience meaning through them. We must appreciate how fundamental metaphor is to all of human experience.

If a symbol is to serve as a carrier of meaning, it must be approached metaphorically.² The metaphoric process is twofold: it is first *seeing* the concrete symbol, form, image, or embodiment, and then *seeing through* it to encounter the associations it calls forth. Meaning emerges in the reflective movement between ourselves and the image. Reflection deepens events into meaningful experience.

We can say that the way of metaphor is the way *through* image. Our awareness of the metaphoric basis of knowledge is an admission that everything we know about the world — indeed, everything that we *can* know about the world — is what we become aware of through the images that cross the threshold of our consciousness. Ideas of the mind, sensations of the body, perceptions of the world, beliefs, feelings, drives: all enter our consciousness as image. In other words, our images of reality are not a literal rendering of the world; they are our most basic interpretations of it. All we can do is glimpse *images* of reality.

A Multiplicity of Viewpoints

The metaphoric stance admits a multiplicity of viewpoints, and a multiplicity of modes of consciousness: thinking, willing, valuing, feeling, believing. Yet, it does not elevate one mode over another. It rather offers the

opportunity for each mode of consciousness to amplify a particular facet of reality in accordance with its particular attitude.

But while image cannot be reduced to one meaning, it is nevertheless very precise. Image coordinates all of our human capacities into an apprehension of meaning that involves our cognition, volition, emotion, drive, and judgment. Therefore, an image can never be reduced to its explication through one particular mode. We can never say that an image is *nothing but* what I interpret it to mean. An

and perhaps this is part of the reason why. In our effort to recover this loss of meaning, we continually try to define, to pin down, to state clearly — in words that can have no other meanings and that must not be construed or interpreted in a variety of different ways — what we believe Judaism *is*.

We must counter this inclination by encountering our Judaism with a metaphoric attitude. Instead of looking at our texts and acts from the strictures of a nominalism that wants only to indicate, to point to, to say pre-

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image can always point to more meanings, because it can always be looked at in another way.

When we become aware of the metaphoric basis of mind, we realize that the sober, flat definition of reality in a scientific theory is only one of the ways we portray the world in our *image*-ation.³ We recognize that a theory of science or a theory of metaphysics is no less metaphorical than any other image that presents itself as a root idea, figure of myth, or style of consciousness.⁴

Recovering Lost Meaning

There are those who mistrust this metaphoric way of viewing reality. Unsettled when there is no fixity, they would like to reduce words to mean nothing but what they signify. But we have experienced a loss of meaning in Judaism and Reconstructionism,

cisely what *is*, we must grant ourselves the expansive play of our imagination in examining our liturgical images. Only then should we judge, evaluate, and propose new ideas.

The Chosen People

To explore the implications of a metaphoric perspective, let us engage in the metaphoric process by *seeing* and *seeing through* the Chosen People issue that continues to dominate our most heated discussions. Let us focus on the moment in the *Shaharit* service when an individual is called up to the Torah and must choose to recite either the traditional *asher bahar banu mikol ha'amim* or the Reconstructionist *asher kervanu la'avodato*. We will discuss that moment in two respects — as a metaphor of words and as a metaphor of enactment.



The Birnbaum translation of the first Torah blessing is:

Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has chosen us from all peoples, and has given us Thy Torah. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, Giver of the Torah.

The concrete image pictured in these words is that of a masterful, lordly king who has selected out a particular group (the group that would chant this blessing) from among all other groups, and who has given that group the Torah. A literal reading of these words indicates that there is a king who is called God and who, just like human beings, rules his kingdom, the Universe. This King, a tremendously powerful ruler of the universe, has selected a special group for special honor and purpose.

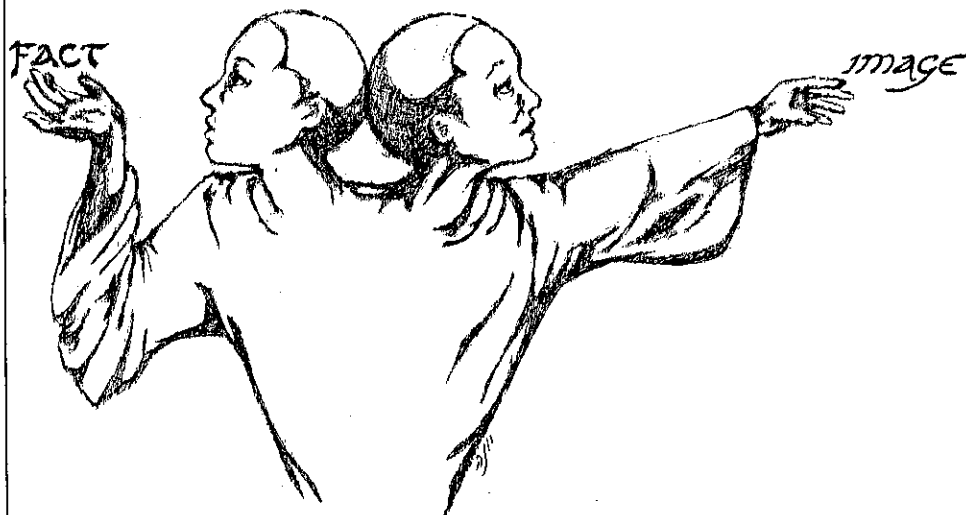
It is easy to dismiss this image as a literal description of the world, because the universe is not organized as a kingdom among other historical kingdoms. There is no Supersperson who rules it in the same way as a human king rules. Therefore, the literal idea that the Jews are a chosen people can be dismissed, because there is no chooser and because we do not experience reality in that way.

Seeing Through the Image

If that were all that were contained in the phrase *asher bahar banu*, it would lack the power and meaning that persists in claiming our response. But we do feel that claim and that power. So we must see through

this image to another kind of meaning.

Let us redeem the text from the sin of literalism by dissolving the literal belief in God as a person. Rather, let us enter into a mythic relationship to the images by encountering God *as if* we were in relationship to an Other. Through the imaginative act of mythical personification, we can encounter the immediacy and claim of real human relationships we have known. We bring our liturgy to life by engaging in a



fantasy of God in human guise.

This mythic relationship resonates through the complex of associations, wishes, and historical occurrences that we have experienced as individuals and that have been experienced by the Jewish people. The mythic image, like a constellation of stars, serves, in our imagination, as the broad outline of form. As we begin to see through the image to the associations it constellates, we can become conscious of the deeper meaning that we experience through these words. As we become aware of what the image evokes, we can evaluate these as-

sociations as *ideas*. We can determine, through our faculties of reasoning, thinking, and valuing, whether we wish to retain these words or not.

Feeling Special

There are many levels through which we can amplify the image *asher bahar banu*. On the personal level, the metaphor evokes the image of a child in a family with other children, when the head of the family singles out

one child to receive special status. Like a child, we can experience the sense of specialness through this image.

We can affirm it as a value, however, only insofar as it is important that *every* child feel unique, special, and honored. There is a dark side to this family picture: singling out one child involves the danger of inflation — the sense that I am more special than any other, and that therefore the rules and rights which apply to me are different than for the rest. This aspect of that image then must be rejected as our value.



The Resonance of History

Another possibility of seeing through the image is to look at the children of a family as a group. All the children in a family are more special to their parents than children of any other family. But the sense of equality suggested by such an interpretation has not been available to Jews until the modern era. Rather, Judaism has used this family metaphor to elevate the Jewish people above other nations, because the doctrine and attitude of monotheism insisted that there is only one Supreme Parent — and that He is ours!

Because the Jewish people, through the course of its lifetime, has succumbed to the temptation of inflation, the actual history of this phrase has narrowed it to mean that the Jewish people is better than other peoples, that Jews are more elevated spiritually, or that Judaism is outside the norms of historical processes, responsibilities, and judgment. On this level, *asher bahar banu* resonates with a filled history of inflation that we should want, as Kaplan did, to transcend.

On the other hand, just because historically the Jewish experience has filled the meaning of this image does not mean that its meaning is fixed for eternity. We Reconstructionists recognize that our Judaism is but one path towards God, that there are other paths that image God differently, and that these can be valid. Why then can't we take the phrase to mean that we are chosen and special to God just as others are chosen and special?

Why can't we see through this image to mean that we as a people take our place among equals? After all, if we revalue this image with a pluralistic attitude, then we need not change the blessings. We can say the same words that other Jews have spoken and are speaking because they mean something else to us.

The Difficulty of Revaluation

But it is precisely because of the contemporary sense of its meaning, that *asher bahar banu* cannot be revalued. We can see through many levels of this concrete image — how it can be imagined as a description of a child within a family, as a family among other families, as the sum total of the ways that the Jewish

recall it in order to distance ourselves from the pitfalls of inflation, keeping us ever vigilant that we do not become entrapped again. After all, in looking at the words that are substituted in the Reconstructionist prayer book — “*asher kervanu la'avodato*, who has brought us nigh to thy service” — we see that the literal trap is no less set. Kaplan's phrase, too, can be taken to mean that the Jewish people are selected out by God to do divine service, with all the negative possibilities that have come to be associated with *asher bahar banu*. But while the danger is there, the fact that we are brought to reflect upon our past history by virtue of the change, enables us to see through *asher kervanu* to new meaning. This gives meaning to our Reconstructionist change.

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people historically have taken this image to mean — but we cannot *easily* imagine something different. The image is too fixed, the complex too established, the value too dangerous to suggest that its meaning can be infinitely plastic. To do this would disregard the strength of the history of its meaning and the power of its persistence even today. It would ignore the actual integrity of the complex of associations that are evoked when these words are said.

Yet we must remember the filled history of *asher bahar banu*, whose value we reject. We must

Sacred Enactment

We can approach the whole issue through a different metaphorical perspective by looking at the performance of the blessing as a sacred enactment. In ritual and ceremony, writes anthropologist Victor Turner,

One lives through events, or through the alchemy of its framings and symbolings, relives semiogenetic events, the deeds and words of prophets and saints, or if these are absent, myths and sacred epics.⁵

The Shabbat morning service is an enactment of sacred texts arranged in a particular order and performed with prescribed ceremony. The central ceremony of the *Shaharit* service is the Torah service. An individual is called up to the *bimah* for an aliyah and then chants a formal benediction over the Torah to which the congregation responds.

Each aspect of the service is a symbol among symbols. The act of mounting the stairs to the Torah serves as a physical embodiment that recalls all ascents associated with Jewish history and ideas: Moses' ascent up Mount Sinai to accept the Torah; the ascent of the individual Jew upon the sacrificial mound or the Temple mount to perform an offering to God; the ascent of soul from the mundane to a higher, sacred plane.

This is the only moment in the traditional service when the individual stands alone before the community as an individual (and not as a representative of the community, as does the rabbi, cantor, or Torah reader). The aliyah is the public enactment of an individual's commitment to Judaism, reiterated in the words of the hallowed formula. It is an enactment of belonging and an enactment of belief.

The aliyah is always a numinous moment when the experience of divinity is strong. Even though this numinous quality often is dimmed by repetition or by our increased informality, we still experience the power of standing on the *bimah* before the Torah, ark, *ner tamid* (eternal light), Jewish officiants,

and fellow Jews. The act links us in the living moment to the mythic event of God's calling the Jewish people at Sinai, as well as to all other moments of calling in Jewish and human experience. Yet it is precisely at this central moment in the service that Kaplan chose to change the formula and introduce a reconstructed wording.

the traditional Jewish community and was finally addressed when several Orthodox rabbis placed Kaplan and his followers in *herem* (excommunication) and publicly burned his books to mark a clear schism in the Jewish world. When we invoke Kaplan's formula in the recitation of the Torah blessings, therefore, we are re-enacting his

When we invoke Kaplan's formula in the recitation of the Torah blessings, we re-enact his act of intellectual courage, linking ourselves to a Reconstructionist complex of associations.

The Drama of Reconstruction

Now let us look at the chanting of the Reconstructionist *asher kervanu* with a mythical attitude. When we chant these new words, rather than the words of the tradition, we are doing more than merely changing a formula of words; we are enacting our own calling to a new and no longer traditional way of being Jewish. Whereas saying *asher bahar banu* links us to the biblical drama at Sinai, chanting *asher kervanu* links us both to that drama and to the dramatic founding of Reconstructionism as well.

When Mordecai Kaplan published *Judaism as a Civilization*, he articulated the root metaphor of our movement, that Judaism is an evolving religious civilization. His break with the past foreshadowed a breach of the Jewish social order.⁶ A crisis erupted in

act of intellectual courage. We are linking ourselves in the living to a Reconstructionist complex of associations.

Saying *asher kervanu* resonates with great meaning, not only as a metaphoric enactment of Kaplan's courageous break with the past. It also vivifies for us our commitment to a world view that had to break with the authority of tradition. It reverberates through us like all the great breaks we have had to make in our personal lives, and carries the same fear and trembling that such breaks have meant in Jewish and human history.

Seen through in this way, the act of chanting *asher kervanu* becomes both a precious and wrenching re-enactment. For those Reconstructionists who grew up in Orthodox homes, for those "old guard" Reconstructionists who followed Kaplan when traditional Judaism dominated the Jewish scene, and for all those who embrace Reconstructionism because it offers



them something radically different from their unsatisfying Jewish experiences, *asher kervanu* means a break from the hold of the past and the particularism of the present.

A New Framework

Recognizing these dimensions of the change of the blessings leads to a new framework for understanding the debate in the movement about *asher bahar banu*. In fact, this debate is not entirely about theology or even philosophy of liturgy. It is about whether we should affirm a distinctive, schismatic identity as Reconstructionists or whether we want to reach back and reach out to reunite with the tradition and the rest of the Jewish people. It is a debate between those of us who are breaking away from the tradition and those who are returning, between those who want to make a public declaration of their belonging to a different Judaism and those who do not feel that need.

Those of us who are committed to chanting *asher kervanu la'avodato* find that sacred meaning and community are built through these words. By chanting the change, we remind ourselves that we are committed to new ideals for the Jewish and human community. For us, chanting *asher kervanu* is a meaningful act because it forges our bond of belonging and affirms our bond of belief with other Reconstructionists.

Soul-Making

By seeing and seeing through our words and enactments, we

approach our legacy of images for their metaphorical value. If soul is a metaphor for that unknown component of our psyche that makes meaning possible, then in seeing and seeing through our words and enactments, we experience the making of soul. Soul-making becomes the process of finding the possibilities of meaning; our continued effort to reconstruct Judaism becomes the most sacred of tasks.

By seeing and seeing through the symbols of Judaism, we bring soul into Judaism and make Judaism into soul. After all, without the inherence of soul — the “in-here-ness” of soul — no words and acts can move us to make meaning.⁷

But a meaningful encounter with a heritage of symbols is not enough. As we Reconstructionists well know, when our Jewish heritage does not provide forms for our new sense of self, we must find new forms to express ourselves. Particularly, the absence of images of the feminine limits us in expressing what it is to be most wholly/holy human in a Jewish context. Therefore, our soul-making calls out for new symbols and other images to carry our lives through to meaning. As we discover these new forms and recover older images, we continue to fulfill our sacred vocation of making soul in the world.

Reconstructing Reconstructionism

We must encounter Reconstructionism with the same honesty and authenticity with which we encounter all of our

Jewish legacy. Kaplan gave to us both a methodology for examining our liturgy and specific changes that resulted from his own particular examination. We must use his methodology — amplified through our contemporary understanding — to examine the very changes that he himself advocated. When we find that existing changes speak to us, we must retain them; and when we find that they are no longer meaningful, then we must have the courage to find what makes meaning for us now. To do less would be to deny Kaplan's own example.

Kaplan was a Jewish master, not so that we would follow him in becoming Kaplanian, but so that we might follow him in becoming Jewish. His root metaphor, from which all of our efforts grow, is as enduring now as it was when he offered it. It is a metaphor that sees through itself. If Judaism is an evolving religious civilization, then Kaplan's great idea itself is one that allows reconstructing to continue as an ongoing, dynamic, meaningful process. Whether or not specific changes that Reconstructionism made in the past shall be retained or changed again must be questions we continue to debate. Our decisions, like Kaplan's and like our ancestors before him, will become yet another part of the Jewish heritage that must be encountered anew in every generation.

NOTES

1. See the symposium on “The Chosen People Reconsidered,” RECONSTRUCTIONIST 50/1 (September 1984) and the further discussion in 50/4 (January-February 1985), p. 50f.

(completed on page 20)