14. Arthur Green, *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition*

Daniel Landes, "Hidden Master"

Arthur Green and Daniel Landes, "God, Torah, and Israel: An Exchange"

Arthur Green, *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010

Rabbi Dr. Arthur Green (1941–) is Director of the Rabbinical School and Irving Brudnick Professor of Jewish Philosophy and Religion at Hebrew College.

The need for ongoing human participation in the quest for redemption is the context of the volume you have before you. Radical Judaism means a reframing of our contemporary perspective on the great questions, a leap forward that shows we are not afraid to be challenged by contemporary reality, while we remain devoted to hearing the greater challenge of God's voice calling out "Where are you?" anew in our age. This means a Judaism that takes seriously its own claims of ongoing Creation and revelation, even as it recognizes all the challenges to them. To "take them seriously" in our day cannot mean simply holding fast to them without question, dismissing the challenges of science and scholarship or seeking to avoid dealing with them. It means rather to rethink our most foundational concepts—God, Torah, and Israel and Creation, Revelation, Redemption, to ask how they might work in the context of what we really believe in our age, and thus how they might speak to seekers in this century. Going back to the mountain and hearing the Word again, hearing it with clarity as the eternal voice speaks for our own day, will require a new sort of listening, one that has never yet existed, unique to this generation and to this moment. (163–164)

To be a Jew is still to think about the right way to live, to be challenged to respond. How do we live a holy life after the Holocaust, with a third of our

people dead and so many wounded by cynicism and despair? How do we stand before Sinai as a people that fully includes the voices of women equally with those of men? How do we lift our heads in God's presence in a time when Jews are seen by many, and with some justification, as oppressors rather than victims? Our response needs to change shape and grow in each generation as it is confronted with the new and different challenges, but it still faces the same question. *Ayekah*? Where are you? How are you going to live? When we live badly, especially when we are selfish, mean, or uncaring, we are disgraced before our fellow Jews. "A Jew should know better" is something we all feel. What is "conduct unbefitting a member of the Jewish people?" We know it when we see it and we call it *hillul ha-Shem*, a defaming of God's name, that name we all bear as part of the word "Israel." The echo of covenant is commingled with the memory of Egypt and the long history of persecution in telling us when and how "a Jew should know better." (164–165)

I believe with complete faith that new forms of Judaism will emerge in the state of Israel, America, and elsewhere, distilled from the multiple experiments in Jewish living that are currently taking place in the lives of diverse individuals, households, and small communities. This is a process that will take several generations and cannot be rushed. Those who participate in this creative process are multiple and varied, including Jews by choice, refugees from ultra-Orthodoxy, and many whom they will meet in the middle. The new Judaism will not be created top-down by committees of rabbis or (God forbid) by presidents of major Jewish organizations. The *halakhah*, or pathway, of the future will be more flexible, more multistranded, than any we have known. It will only emerge from a new *aggadah*, a new articulation of Jewish faith that succeeds in capturing the hearts of generations of Jews. This narrative will take us back to the old tales, but with contemporary eyes and ears wide open. The voice calls forth each day. When we are ready, it will address us. My prayer is that this book constitutes a small step along that evolutionary path.

This is the moment for radical Judaism. We understand that all God can do is to call out to us, now as always. All we can do is respond—or not. The consequence of our failure will be monumental. God is indeed in need of humans; and we humans are in need of guidance, seeking out the hand of a divine Partner, one who "speaks" from deep within the heart, but also from deep within our tradition and its wisdom.

Such a time cries out for leadership, for covenant, and for *mitzvah*, all of them expanded and redefined for this hour. (165–166)

Daniel Landes, "Hidden Master," *Jewish Review of Books*, Fall 2010

Rabbi Daniel Landes (1950–) is Founder and Director of Yashrut and the former Director of the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies.

There are dangers lurking in the kind of rhetoric that Green and like-minded thinkers employ. When Green urges, for instance, that we must "let others know that we and they are part of the same One when we treat them like brothers and sisters, or like parts of the same single universal body," he is perhaps contributing to the arousal of energies that may prove difficult to control. The dismissal of clear legal norms as nothing more than a transitory response to a wordless call, or the replacement of a firm prohibition of adultery with nothing more than self-selected boundaries ("make sure that all your giving is for the sake of those who seek to receive it"), is a failure to reckon with the power of temptation and the function of law, human or divine.

Compared with Green's God and his Torah, Green's Israel seems more familiar. It is still the people descended from Abraham. But it exists in some tension with what he calls "my Israel." The latter consists of the people he describes as "you for whom I write, you whom I teach, you with whom I feel a deep kinship of shared human values and love of this Jewish language." Green admits, "(partly in sadness!) that it no longer suffices for me to limit my sense of spiritual fellowship to those who fall within the ethnic boundaries that history has given us." He is, indeed, prepared to say:

> I have more in common with seekers and strugglers of other faiths than I do with either the narrowly and triumphally religious [or] the secular and materialistic elements within my own community.

Thus Green calls for a broader "Israel," imagining "an extended faith-community of Israel, a large outer courtyard of our spiritual Temple."

Although Green himself is a person who is clearly attached to the Jewish people, the logic of his position is disturbing. It leads him to privilege people possessing the proper spiritual consciousness, "my Israel," over the actual people of Israel. When Green lectured a decade ago at the Pardes Institute, where I am the current director, he spoke beautifully of Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter's *ahavat Yisrael* (his love of Israel, or solidarity

with fellow Jews), but I find no doctrine of *ahavat Yisrael* in Green's radical theology.

Arthur Green and Daniel Landes, "God, Torah, and Israel: An Exchange," *Jewish Review of Books*, Winter 2011

Arthur Green: The high point of my annoyance is Landes's claim that I offer "no doctrine of ahavat Yisrael." This book is written entirely in the spirit of love for both Judaism and Jews. Why else would I make the effort? Landes is unhappy that I admit openly my deep alienation from "the narrowly and triumphally religious" within our community. Honesty can sting. My claim to be "a religious Jew but a secular Zionist" is also intentionally distorted for polemical purposes. I meant simply that I remain committed to the vision of a Jewish and democratic state (There—I have signed my loyalty oath!) while according it no messianic significance. Has that gotten too hard to understand?

Landes lines up with the late Sam Dresner and others in expressing an overweaning fear of anything that smacks of pantheism, celebrating God within nature, or an underlying sense of universal religiosity. But it is precisely this sort of religion that I believe humanity most urgently needs in this century, when our collective survival as a species is so threatened. I am here to teach a Jewish version of it, one relying deeply on our own sources and bearing our values, but without making an exclusive truth claim for Judaism. I rejoice that the deepest religious truths are known to men and women of many cultures, clothed in the garments of both east and west. See Malachai 1:11.

Daniel Landes: Green writes that the "high point of his annoyance" with me is in my contention that he presents a theology that has no doctrine of ahavat Yisrael, and then goes on to assert that he loves Jews and supports the State of Israel. I never asked for a loyalty oath or doubted Green's love of his fellow Jew. But neither of these adds up to a doctrine. In his book it would appear that he would replace simple Jews—if they have the wrong politics or a backward spirituality—with a member of Green's "extended faith community" ("my Israel") who is not Jewish but who shares his journey. My point was that ahavat Yisrael is about empirical (one might almost say carnal) Jews, an actual living community. But ahavat Yisrael also cuts both ways. Tradition leads me to maintain—as difficult as it might be to fathom from these exchanges—that Green and I are inextricably bound to (and stuck with) each other.

COMMENTARY BY SAMUEL HAYIM BRODY

The theological disagreement between Arthur Green and Daniel Landes is an important disagreement between two significant contemporary Jewish teachers. At the same time, it is a distant border skirmish, a report of which might be skimmed in the newspaper in the imperial capital before quickly turning the page. This is because of the relatively low rank of theology in the list of concerns bedeviling twenty-first-century Jewish communities. This is nothing new, of course; theology has often been the province of elites, while most people are content to muddle through without developing the kind of rigorous coherence between life and thought that professional thinkers demand.

Nonetheless, it would certainly be tempting to evaluate the debate between Green and Landes by scoring for points as in a boxing match. Each of them gets off a few good jabs: Landes is right that Green makes evolution meaningful only at the price of mischaracterizing the basic operation of natural selection! Green successfully calls out Landes's cheap shot about sex scandals in Renewal, forcing Landes to apologize! Landes defends the piety of the simple Jew, who just wants to talk to God! Green accuses Modern Orthodoxy of being theologically stagnant! But such an exercise would be beside the point. Rather than agree with one or the other, or even offer a critique of both, I would prefer to take a step back and to note the ways in which attention to the contours of the disagreement can tell us much about a particular set of contemporary religious Jewish worlds.

In one of these worlds, there is a hunger for a theology and an approach to Jewish traditions that can adequately confront an interlocking set of modern challenges: the challenge of modern scientific theories to traditional understandings of cosmological and human origins as well as of the possibility of miracles; the challenge of modern historical study to traditional understandings of the coherence, unity, and authorship of the Hebrew Bible and of rabbinic literature; and the challenge of modern liberalism, multiculturalism, and pluralism to traditional understandings of peoplehood and divine election. Since the nineteenth century, a number of such theologies have been tried and discarded, each one attempting to preserve particular aspects of Jewish tradition at the expense of others, trading off emphases and de-emphases in dynamic relation to contemporary philosophy and politics (and often with one eye on how Christians were dealing with the same issues).

Early on, the most pronounced tendency was to emphasize rationalism, selectively foregrounding elements of Jewish traditions that seemed to conform

to the political, cultural, and religious parameters of the Enlightenment. Later generations, however, rebelled against what they perceived as the sterility and predictability of these rationalisms, and turned instead to those parts of Jewish tradition that emphasized mystery and ineffable experiences of the divine. Green stands squarely in this lineage. His neo-Chasidic mystical panentheism is not a rejection of modernity and its challenges, but rather a claim that religious rationalism fails to inspire and thus fails to offer Jews a way to meet those challenges. This is why it is somewhat strange for Landes to claim to find Green's "hidden master" in Mordecai Kaplan, founder of Reconstructionism and unabashed rationalist. But while this assertion may not reveal much about Green, it does reveal something about Landes and his world.

In the second world, the dominant mood is less hunger than anxiety. This world is confident that the traditional sources of Judaism (and it is always "Judaism," in the singular) can deal with all the challenges of modernity without losing itself. But it worries about mistakes being made in the process, about attempts to meet the challenges that tip too far in one direction or another, tumbling off the edge of the narrow ridge of Orthodoxy into an abyss. On one side, too much particularism (the *Charedim*); on the other side, too much universalism (liberal Jews). On one side, too much supernaturalism; on the other side, overweening and arrogant scientificity. On one side, blind allegiance to living *rebbes* as infallible channels of Torah; on the other side, unconstrained individualism and chaos. And on both sides (!), a failure to understand the political and theological significance and necessity of the State of Israel.

This latter point, while it is only one of many disagreements between Green and Landes, and at first pass not even close to the most important one, is worth dwelling upon because it provides a way of linking our "distant skirmish" back to the fault lines more fatally dividing Jewish communities today. Landes constructs his critique of Green according to the tripartite schema of God, Torah, Israel—themes represented as core to Judaism, such that any theology that fails to offer recognizable versions of them may be said not only to have fallen off the narrow ridge, but to be outside the bounds of Judaism completely. For Landes, Green's God, a classically panentheist substrate of Being, is insufficiently personal to count as a descendant of the speaking and commanding God of the Torah. Green's Torah offers no revelation that can serve to distinguish the nations of the world from the specific, elected covenant partner of God at Sinai, namely Israel. And Green's Israel is disturbingly defined as a community of elective affinity rather than of ancestry *and* affinity, together. Of course, there is precedent in Jewish traditions for all of these

ideas, and much of the subsequent argument between the two men, played out in the virtual pages of *Jewschool* and of the *Jewish Review of Books*, involves dispute on the proper interpretation of these Maimonidean, Zoharic, and Chasidic sources.

But to read this debate as *primarily* about hermeneutics would, I think, put the cart before the horse. The debate is about boundaries. It is about what gets to count as Judaism in the twenty-first century. For Green and his world, the answer to that question is determined by hunger, whereas for Landes and his world, the answer is determined by anxiety. The State of Israel does not inspire liberal American Jews *Jewishly*, but it does assuage the anxiety of many Israeli and American Jews about the prospects of Jewish survival. What Landes does, in his critique of Green, is elide physical survival and spiritual survival by nearly imperceptibly eliding the people of Israel into the State.

This should not necessarily surprise us, since the most theologically exciting aspect of the State of Israel for non-messianically inclined Orthodox Jews has typically been the opportunity offered by renewed Jewish independence for the exploration of new vistas of Halakhah. Whole areas of halakhic creativity, constrained by the subservience of the Exile, are now free to develop, from the law of war to political economy to the treatment of non-Jewish minorities. Green's "radical Judaism," like much liberal Jewish thought, prefers to focus on religious experience and theological understanding rather than on Halakhah (something Landes alludes to as one of the many "dangers" of Green's thought), and so this particular aspect of Jewish statehood cannot be religiously inspiring for Green. What should not go unnoticed, however, is the revolutionary—or even "radical"—nature of *Landes's* view. In his anxious mood, he presents himself as the defender of that singular Judaism, with its personal God, its revealed written and oral Torah, and its elected and covenanted Israel. But then, all of a sudden, as if in mid-sentence—the State. This is new, and from a historical perspective it is just as "radical" as Green's own view.

After all, there is precedent for an impersonal, abstract God in Maimonides and the Zohar, but there is no precedent for identifying the people of Israel—God's elected covenant partner—with a secular state. To be sure, Religious Zionists, like any other stream of Jewish tradition attempting to answer modern challenges, has its preferred stable of precedents for citation: Yehuda Halevi on Jewish peoplehood; Nahmanides on the commandment to live in the Land; the *aliyah* of the students of the Vilna Gaon, etc. But the procedure of selecting and assembling these sources is not, from the outside, any more authentic or natural

as an extension of "Judaism" than Green's own procedure. Green does not, himself, make this point; he reacts to Landes's claims about his lack of theological *ahavat Yisrael* by stressing his liberal Zionist credentials. But he correctly perceives the tone of Landes's critique as heresiological ("what's a Jew to do?"), and the justice of his reaction against this would be strengthened by the recognition of this authenticity sleight-of-hand.

None of this is to say, of course, that Green has hit upon the intellectual theological solution that will satisfy the hunger of his world. Perhaps many liberal Jews, regardless of denominational affiliation, implicitly conceive of God as "the infinitely varied self-garbing of an endless energy flow" (*RJ*, 25). But Landes had a point—even if I refrain from scoring the debate on points—that it is difficult to say, on Green's account, why we should not expect the progress of science to eventually eliminate the mystery upon which his theology relies.