into the lives of those who are touched by monstrous evil. A person who has encountered God in the darkness of unknowing is, I believe, the best guide for one who is groping in that darkness but who is unable to identify the cloud.

If the church wishes to learn to confront the evils which irrevocably alter consciousness (genocide, mass starvation, systemic injustice, nuclear war) then it must understand and be willing to live in the dark night of the soul and in the cloud of unknowing. If the church is to work actively in the world in behalf of justice and peace, it must not only do so in obedience to God but it must also be prepared to encounter God as present and active precisely in those situations where he seems most painfully absent. The idolatrous character of American civil religion is nowhere more clearly disclosed than in the variety of props it constructs to insulate its adherents from evil. In striking at the idol, however, American Christianity should be aware that its favorite images of God are also inadequate. The divine guarantor of success, personal healing, charismatic enthusiasm, social betterment and psychological fulfillment also crumbles when confronted with monstrous evil. I think the Vietnam experience should teach us this if nothing else.

The only God who remains is the Totally Other, who commands us to empty ourselves in imitation of him who became obedient to the death on the cross. The neon lights of our idolatries fail in the darkness of evil that surrounds the cross. They "don't mean nothin'." To God alone belongs the power to redeem the broken world. Within the shadow of the cross all religious images are illusions and all religious discourse is cheap talk. The one remaining Christian possibility is to bend the knee and to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ■

Neo-Hasidism in Suburbia

NEHEMIAH POLEN

ONE MIGHT ARGUE that, just as other religions have a characteristic devotional posture — such as kneeling or prostrating — so does American Judaism: leaning. In an effort to appeal to a broad cross-section of the Jewish community, and to forestall defections, many synagogues adopt a stance which cuts across the neat ideological divisions fostered by the major branches of American Judaism and their respective theological seminaries. We thus hear of Orthodox synagogues "leaning to" Conservative, Reconstructionist "leaning to" Reform, and similar postural permutations. In a quiet Boston suburb, situated just outside the high-technology belt traced by Route 128, a young rabbinic graduate of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati named Lawrence Kushner is apparently evolving a new religious orientation, which might be called Reform-leaning-to-neo-Hasidic.

Congregation Beth El, of which he is the rabbi, delights in resurrecting archaic traditions and rituals. Congregants sway and chant in the traditional manner, Hasidic melodies punctuate the service, and large woolen *tallitot* (prayer shawls) are *de riguer*. The quiet decorum which characterized the classical Reform service is conspicuously absent. Yet this is no Hasidic *shtibel*: women may lead services, and the congregation recently published its own nonsexist prayerbook. The general tone is informal and participatory; a conscious effort is made to lessen the physical and psychological distance between rabbi and congregant.

Kushner has several books to his credit. Unlike standard rabbinic literary productions — warmed-over sermons and moralistic and inspirational tracts — Kushner has attempted to write *seforim*, sacred texts meant to be studied and not just read, in the English language. His first book, *The Book of Letters*, combined calligraphy and text in an evocative presentation of the rabbinic and kabbalistic traditions regarding the mystery and power of the Hebrew language and its constituent elements. In his second work, *Honey from the Rock: Vision of Jewish Mystical Renewal*, Kushner presented a contemporary articulation of the kabbalistic system of *Sefirot*.

His latest work, *The River of Light: Spirituality, Judaism, and the Evolution of Consciousness* (Rossel Books, $12.95 hardcover; Harper & Row, $8.95 paperback), marks a new stage in Kushner's development as a religious thinker and writer. It is his boldest and most ambitious book to date, distinguished for breadth of vision and elegance of expression. Like most *seforim*, it is structured as commentary on an earlier sacred text, in this case the story of Abraham's encounter with the three angelic guests, as elaborated by the *Zohar*.

The exposition relies more on associative chains of thought than on linear argumentation; it freely switches levels of signification and universes of discourse. The author clearly intends the sense to reveal itself by a process of sympathetic interaction, and not by mere intellectual comprehension. Rather than stating his thesis — that a mystical unity obtains between the deepest core of the human psyche, the universe and God — in a didactic manner, Kushner allows his point to emerge gradually from the complexly textured patterns of the work itself. As is the case with much of classical rabbinic literature, the medium is an instantiation of the message.

ON A NUMBER of levels, this book is a remarkable achievement. Judged on the basis of stylistic criteria, it successfully captures the spirit of rabbinic

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Midrash in a contemporary idiom. In exploring the parallels between the dynamics of biblical narrative and the dream state, Kushner convincingly demonstrates the close relationship between the Jewish exegetical tradition and the techniques of psychoanalytic interpretation. While many others have written about "Freud and Judaism" using the methods of intellectual history, he relies on a type of phenomenological evocation which is particularly appropriate for his subject.

Kushner charts new territory for Jewish theology in his treatment of the relationship between certain findings at the cutting edges of contemporary science, such as molecular biology and astrophysics, and the teachings of Jewish mysticism. Before we are able properly to evaluate Kushner's contribution, however, we must take a brief look at the history of the uneasy interaction between modern science and Jewish thought.

We are all familiar with the story of the clash between Galileo and the Roman Catholic Church. To this day, that episode is often evoked to symbolize the struggle between free inquiry and dogmatic rigidity of all kinds, and Galileo's words "*e pur si muove*" ("and yet it moves") are still quoted in the defense of intellectual freedom.

Now it is a fact that no Jewish advocate of the views of Copernicus and Galileo was ever put on trial for heresy. It is important to point out, however, that in the medieval period and beyond, the Jewish community had far less rigid governance procedures and ecclesiastical structures than did the Catholics. And before we assume that Judaism in this period was more open to new ideas and more tolerant of divergent opinions, we must recall that Jewish religious authorities simply did not have the ability to enforce total conformity. While it is true that, as Andre Neher has pointed out, the Midrashic tradition of exegetical freedom allowed for a nonliteral reading of biblical texts which were cited as proof of a geocentric universe, nevertheless Jewish proponents of the heliocentric world view were often severely criticized. (This argument was suggested in a lecture by Hillel Levine of Boston University titled "Paradise Not Surrendered: Jewish Response to Copernicus.")

Darwinian evolution theory caused at least as much consternation among Jewish believers as it did among Christians, and the spectrum of responses was similar in both cases (the world was created in seven literal days, but with an appearance of great antiquity; the seven "days" of the biblical account are not literal days but eons; and so on). To this day, much of the research and publishing activity of the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists relates to what, in Christian circles, is called creationist science. Reform Jewish writers have, in general, unreservedly affirmed the truth claims of modern science, with a few recent demurrals relating to the tyranny of technological control of human affairs, along the lines of Ellul, Mumford and others.

AT PRESENT, few serious Jewish writers have awakened to the fact that the condition of the scientific enterprise has itself changed dramatically over the past 100 years. The verities of the classical period have been irrevocably shattered. There has been a revolutionary shift in the way we look at both macro-

cosmic and microcosmic events. This relates in part to the discovery of new facts previously unknown; but more significantly, there is a new understanding of what scientific "facts" are, and how they are shaped by the physical and conceptual tools of the investigator. There is a new apprehension of scientific knowledge as being socially constructed, and therefore not objective in quite the same way as had once been assumed. There is an emerging realization that the adoption of new scientific theories may sometimes have as much to do with techniques of persuasion as with supposedly incontrovertible evidence or the results of "crucial" experiments.

In physics, the shattered fragments of the once-indestructible atom have long since been transferred to an elementary particle "zoo" of bewildering diversity. Only the credulously simple-minded can now believe that with the advent of the quark we have finally reached the bottom, that no deeper level of matter, accessible only through still more powerful accelerators, yet remains to be discovered.

No two theorists seem to agree on the correct interpretation of the new physics; with conceptual confusion has come an excess of interpretive freedom. So it is that physics, once the hardest of the hard sciences, is now becoming the inspiration for imaginative fantasies and speculations of all kinds. A number of books have appeared linking the new physics to such fields as parapsychology and Eastern mysticism. Who can gainsay these syncretistic explorations, when radical philosophers of science now deny any special methodological superiority or epistemological validity to the approaches and findings of Western science?

Jewish theologians, of whatever denominational stripe, have been remarkably slow in responding to the new situation. After all, the new physics has been with us, in a variety of manifestations, for the better part of a century. Yet, in the main, the old battles are still being fought — and with the same antiquated weapons. A survey of Jewish writers on the theme of science and religion discloses little sensitivity to the fact that the terms of the discussion have changed dramatically since the 19th century; the polar responses of defensive hostility and obsequious fawning are still very much in evidence.

One looks in vain for the vigorous perspicacity of a Bishop Berkeley (1685-1735), who, not long after the appearance of Newton's classic work on the infinitesimal calculus, wrote a scathing attack called "The Analyst; a Discourse Addressed to an Infidel Mathematician," in which he exposed the internal contradictions, unwarranted assumptions and general fuzziness of Newton's mathematical arguments. Berkeley noted caustically that anyone who could "digest a second or third fluxion, a second or third difference, need not . . . be squeamish about any point in Divinity." That Berkeley's attack was not merely a case of gratuitous carping or sour grapes is demonstrated by the fact that the placing of the calculus on a sound methodological footing engaged some of the greatest mathematical thinkers — of the stature of Gauss, Cauchy, Weierstrass and others — well into the 19th century.

If Berkeley were alive today, he would undoubtedly point out that anyone who could digest the Uncertainty Principle, the particle-wave duality, the theory of relativity, and the embarrassing abundance of real and virtual elementary particles "need not be squeamish about any point in Divinity." Indeed, partisans of various religious traditions have not hesitated to exploit the confusion in modern physics, and claims have appeared in

print to the effect that new physics "proves" the validity of the Buddhist view of human personality, the biblical account of creation, or whatever doctrinal perspective the expositor happens to hold.

WITH THIS BACKGROUND in mind, Kushner's use of the findings of astrophysics, microbiology and other glamorous scientific specialties is particularly interesting. He avoids an excessive obeisance to the truth claims of the scientific world view, and resists the understandable temptation to use the new discoveries as a whetstone to sharpen his own doctrinal axe. For example, he notes the remarkable parallel between the recently discovered background microwave radiation, thought to be a residue of the cosmic "Big Bang," and the "hidden light" of the first moments of creation spoken of by the Midrash and Zohar. He does not use this point, however, to feed a sense of triumphalism that "we knew it all along." Rather, he suggests that the correspondences between the emerging scientific mythology and ancient religious truth should not surprise us because both reflect an essential connection between the universe, the Divine, and human consciousness.

As the eminent physicist John Archibald Wheeler put it in a statement cited by Kushner, "The analysis of the physical world, pursued to sufficient depth, will lead back in some now-hidden way to man himself, to conscious mind, tied unexpectedly through the very acts of observation and participation to partnership in the foundation of the universe." One could hardly imagine a better contemporary Midrash on the verse, "And God created man in His own image . . ."

But what kind of God are we now talking about? What, in particular, of the God of the biblical and rabbinic tradition who rewards, punishes, redeems, commands and reveals himself in moments of transcendent majesty? Kushner reminds us that this point of the teachings of Jewish mysticism which place God as much within us as in heaven, which affirm divine immanence as much as divine transcendence. There is no need, says Kushner, to choose between these two views of God; both are true in their own way:

> The One of Being did not speak from without *or* from within, but from without *and* from within. . . . Our goal must be to restore the balance, to place the source of the voice, the source of reality, *everywhere*. Inside us *and* outside us. The "I am the One of Being" which one tradition heard from on top of the mountain, could also have been heard from within every person. . . . The One we call the Holy One, and the ones the Holy One calls us, are the same beings, seen from different sides.

The quasi-pantheistic sentiments which Kushner espouses have, at various times and places, surfaced within the tradition of Jewish mysticism (as Kushner himself is quick to point out), most recently within Hasidism. Generally, however, there was a quick return to less controversial theological formulations. In the case of Hasidism, which is most instructive in this regard, the backing-off was undoubtedly due in part to the vehemence of the opposition which the theological radicalism engendered. But it would be a mistake to suppose that the threats, denunciations and bans of excommunication issued by their opponents (called the Mitnaggedim) against the Hasidim were very effective in stemming the spread of the new revivalist movement. They were not. Rather, the Hasidic movement imposed on itself a kind of internal censorship, recognizing that some of its opponents' more reasoned objections were in fact quite valid.

The most sophisticated and respected critic of Hasidism was Hayyim Volozhiner (1749-1821), founder of the great Volozhiner Yeshiva and disciple of the famed Gaon of Vilna. It is notable that, in his classic work on Jewish theology and practice, *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, he never denies the legitimacy of Hasidic teachings on divine immanence when judged from a purely theoretical perspective. On the contrary, he seems to wish to outdo the Hasidim in the extremity of his statements regarding the all-pervading nature of the divine Presence.

There is, of course, a "but": whatever ultimate ontological validity the emphasis on divine immanence and radical monism may have, Hayyim tells us, Judaism is, after all, based on differentiation, distinction and boundaries — not the least of which is the boundary between God and humanity. If God has given us a Torah, and a world in which to fulfill it, God evidently did not want us to short-circuit the pathway to the divine perspective on reality, to the vision of undifferentiated Unity. In its subsequent historical development, Hasidism for the most part implicitly acceded to the validity of Hayyim's critique.

THE RELEVANCE of this position for Kushner's book is clear: the vision he shares with us is indisputably attractive, but profoundly subversive of everyday human reality if held in focus for too long. The author himself points to the problem; toward the end of the book he warns the reader: "If the searcher chooses to remain with eternity, the searcher loses eternity! If the searcher chooses this finite world, the searcher is rewarded with eternity!" Yes, but what does it now mean to "choose this finite world"? The reader is presented with profound insights, but with little sense of how they can be integrated into his or her daily life in any concrete way.

Once again, a glance at the history of Jewish mysticism is instructive. At the same time that the Kabbalah spoke of the Divine within, of the Primordial Adam in whose matrix we are formed, of the return back to Nothing, there was always an emphasis on praxis, on the necessity to follow a spiritual path full of effort and self-discipline. The work was arduous and involved an element of self-surrender. To have presented a vision of ultimate mystical reality without at the same time demanding from the devotee a total commitment and rigorous training would probably have struck the great Jewish mystics as being dangerous, frivolous or both.

In its substitution of vicarious experience for the total personal involvement demanded by most spiritual disciplines, *The River of Light* is not really so far from American suburban culture as its author might suppose. Exploring the bed of Kushner's "river," one dredges up sedimentary layers deposited by successive cultural waves: the human potential movement, Jungian thought and transpersonal psychology, along with traces of Eastern mysticism (California vintage). With respect to Jewish practice in particular, Kushner in effect wishes to have his *kuchel* and eat it too: he would like to embrace only those elements of Jewish observance which seem appropriate to a postrationalist, quasi-mystical suburban culture, while rejecting the rest. In this approach, there is a place for *mitzvah* as celebration of Being but not as binding commandment.

The River of Light reveals an extraordinarily gifted writer and religious thinker. Its author would probably acknowledge that he himself could not predict where the choices it opens up to the reader might lead. Recalling that the word "heresy" is derived from the Greek word for "choice," one may say that the book is indeed heretical. However, as Andre Suares once pointed out, there are no heresies in a dead religion. If nothing else, Lawrence Kushner's *The River of Light* demonstrates that Judaism is very much alive. ■