OLUME 62 • NOS. 3-4 • SPRING-SUMMER 2011 • תשע"א

The Future of Masorti in Israel

featuring

Michael Graetz's "Whither Masorti?"

with responses by

Chaya Rowen Baker • Jeff Cymet • Tamar Elad-Appelbaum
Avraham Feder • Matthew Futterman • Arnold M. Goodman
David M. Gordis • Tzvi Graetz • Reuven Hammer
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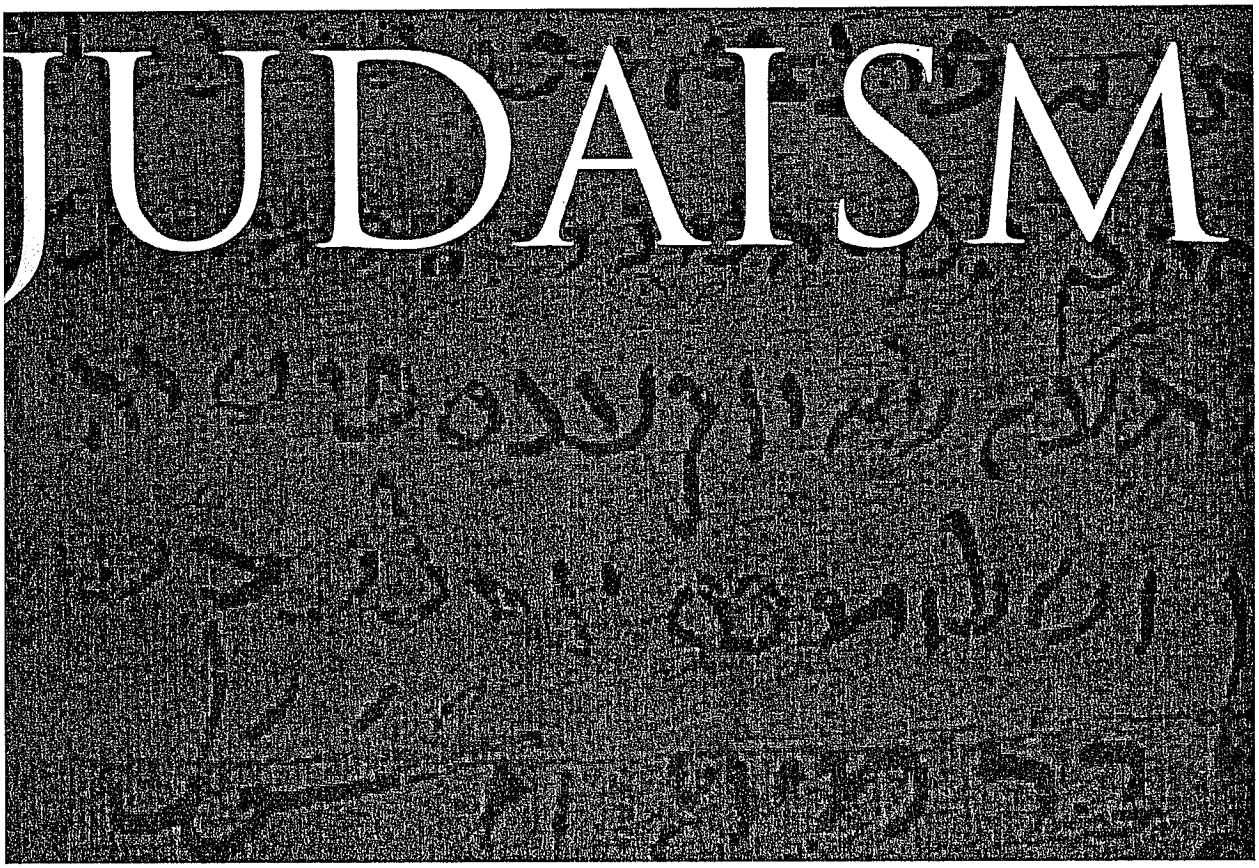
and also featuring

A Conservative Judaism Forum on
Michael Fishbane's Sacred Attunement

CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM



CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

VOLUME 62 NUMBERS 3-4 SPRING-SUMMER 2011

A Publication of the Rabbinical Assembly
Gilah Dror, President

and the Jewish Theological Seminary
Arnold Eisen, Chancellor

Published quarterly in the fall, winter, spring, and summer.
Postmaster: Send change of address to CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM,
3080 Broadway, New York, NY 10027.

ISSN 0010-6542 LC 73-642801

CONSERVATIVE
JUDAISM

VOLUME 62 NUMBER 3–4 SPRING/SUMMER 2011

ARTICLES

Whither Masorti? 3
MICHAEL GRAETZ

Whither a Not Withering Masorti? 14
ARNOLD M. GOODMAN

Our Eyes Shall Yet See It 22
TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

Masorti: Political Party or Socio-Religious Movement? 34
AVRAHAM FEDER

Change the System, Don't Join It 51
ED RETTIG

"O Bee, Neither Your Honey Nor Your Sting" 61
CHAYA ROWEN BAKER

Is This the Way? On Reading Michael Graetz's Essay 68
DAVID M. GORDIS

We Have a Choice 75
GIL NATIV

Whither Masorti? A Response to Michael Graetz 82
JEFF CYMET

Creating a Movement in Israel 95
REUVEN HAMMER

"In a Place Where There Are No Worthy People, Strive To Be Worthy" 108
MATTHEW FUTTERMAN

Writing from the Heart 115
TZVI GRAETZ

Response from the Soul 119
MICHAEL GRAETZ

A CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM FORUM

Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology 136
MICHAEL FISHBANE
Reviews by Jonathan P. Slater, Jonathan Wittenberg, Gail Labovitz, Alon C. Ferency, Dan Ornstein, Daniel Greyber, and Daniel Marom

Dan Ornstein: PaRDeS Pedagogy

> *There was a man who lived in the mountains. He knew nothing about those who lived in the city. He sowed wheat and ate the kernels raw. One day he entered the city. They brought him good bread. He said, "What is this for?" They said, "Bread, to eat." He ate, and it tasted very good. He said, "What is it made of?" They said, "Wheat." Later they brought him cakes kneaded in oil. He tasted them and said, "What are these made of?" They said, "Wheat." Finally they brought him royal pastry made with honey and oil. He said, "And what are these made of?" They said, "Wheat." He said, "I am the master of all of these, for I eat the essence of all of these: wheat!" Because of that view, he knew nothing of the delights of the world; they were lost to him. So it is with one who grasps the principle and does not know all those delectable delights deriving, diverging from that principle.*[1]

As Professor Daniel Matt points out in the commentary to his book of selected Zohar translations, "In this parable, wheat and its products (kernels, bread, cake, and pastry) symbolize four levels of meaning in Torah: simple, homiletical, allegorical, and mystical."[2] This is what Jews traditionally refer to with the slightly reversed acronym PaRDeS: *peshat* (basic), *remez* (allegorical), *derash* (homiletical), and *sod* (mystical). In the worldview of the esoteric circle that produced the Zohar, it is the mystical adepts who are the seekers and students of the "true" mystical Torah of *sod* that is articulated by the Zohar's interpretations of Bible verses. They are restless and sorely dissatisfied with the limited spiritual vision of Torah students who—like the man from the mountains with his wheat kernels—assume that they have mastered all there is to master in Torah through the *peshat,* and by extension, *remez* and *derash* approaches. Unlike the mystics, the non-mystical Torah students may have "tasted" the kernels—the "principle," the simple meaning of the Torah text. They may even have enjoyed the delicious derivations from the text "as she stands": the fanciful, morally rich interpretations of the rabbinic era and the allegorical explanations of medieval philosophers. But until they have "tasted" the deepest, truest mystical insights deriving from God's Torah—the ones similar to the royal pastries—that are as close to God, likened here to a king, that one can come, they are pitifully fooling themselves.

They are no "masters of wheat,"[3] no true students of Torah. Confusing the Torah's essential text with all that there is, they know "nothing of the delights of this world."

Professor Michael Fishbane's exposition of the PaRDeS model to develop what he calls a hermeneutical theology of Judaism can be used as a powerful pedagogic tool that rethinks the hierarchical approach to Torah presumably reflected in the above text. This can make it, and potentially all Jewish religious texts and their values, accessible to all people at all levels. It is not my goal in this paper to review and critique exhaustively the complex and elegant theological statements in *Sacred Attunement.* There are those who have far more scholarly expertise than I do who can do this most adequately. Instead, after summarizing one or two of his insights about hermeneutical theology and PaRDeS, I will try to apply them to this Zohar text, specifically for the purposes of hearing its other voices, that is, the other ways in which it can be taught, learned, and lived. I am particularly fortunate to have taught and been taught this text four times over the past year and a half, to and by four different groups of students: a synagogue adult studies class on the Zohar, a group of day school Judaic Studies teachers, a student preparing to teach the text to her synagogue *ḥavurah,* and a class of university undergraduates. Seeing this text through their eyes and through Professor Fishbane's insights has convinced me of the tremendous value of this "PaRDeS pedagogy."

Jewish Hermeneutical Theology

The "vastness" of life, and the endlessness of its source—God—can only be rendered meaningful through human attentiveness to God's miraculous presence in everyday experience. We seek to make this "mystery of divine actuality appear as manifest presence" (Fishbane, p. 40) through the words and ideas that we speak and teach in our wisdom traditions, religions, and cultures, through our interactions with others and how we treat each other, and through the phenomena, the things that happen in our lives and in the world and what we do with them. By doing this, we are, in turn, transformed by God's presence as part of this mutual process. This is particularly the case with the rules we develop for ethical living, which are the direct behavioral outgrowth of our experience of the sacred in everyday life. For

example, if I experience my fellow human being as a creation in God's image, I will create laws and ideals for living that help me to protect that divine image. Theology is a spiritual discipline that helps to attune and cultivate our ongoing awareness of God's presence in the vastness of life and to act upon that awareness with sanctity and ethical living (pp. 39–43).

Jewish theology, specifically, is hermeneutical, performative, and transformative. It cultivates this attunement to God through ongoing interpretation of Torah, itself the interpretive outgrowth of the indispensable Jewish experience of Sinai; it concretizes this attunement through *mitzvot* and ethical behavior; it helps us to find redemption by making us ever conscious of God (pp. 43–45). I will focus on Professor Fishbane's explanation of the hermeneutical dimension of Jewish theology. He reminds us that Jewish theology began with the revelation of Torah at Sinai, and without that foundational event Jewish theology is inauthentic. However, Sinai was not a one-time event; it is a living process that has been given concrete expression through ongoing interpretation and application by Jews throughout the ages up to our own day. The original *torah she-bikhtav* (Written Torah) gives life to, and is brought to life by, *torah she-b'al-peh,* the Oral Torah that also began at Sinai but that we make new each time we learn and interpret Torah.

Professor Fishbane then introduces an innovative approach to the concept of *torah kelulah*, the Torah of "All-in-All." As he explains in his notes, the concept was originally expressed by the medieval kabbalist, Rabbi Yitzḥak Ha-Zaken, who saw it as the "preternatural Torah" preceding the revelation of the Torah as we know it, one that contains all possible forms of creation imaginable. It is embedded in the *sefirah* of *ḥesed,* the unfolding part of God's inner life that involves divine love, desire, and compassion. Professor Fishbane uses the term to mean the totality of all life and being as we can experience it (p. 219). As Jews practicing our distinctive hermeneutical theology, we experience God through three different Torahs: through the Written and Oral Torahs that are linked scripturally, as well as through *torah kelulah*, the "Torah of life itself" that we glean simultaneously from our experience of life and from our study of the words of the Written and Oral Torahs. The three are Kohelet's "unbreakable three-fold cord" (Kohelet 4:12). We glimpse the deepest truths about life through the words of Torah, and our study of those words is in turn deeply affected by what life teaches

us. As he puts it, "The relationship between the received text and life-situations unfolds in the course of interpretation" (p. 63). However, Jews go even further than this. We practice this three-dimensional hermeneutical attunement to God using four equally valid, separate, but overlapping tools: *peshat, remez, derash,* and *sod.* "Taken altogether, this exegetical quarternary has been denominated by the acronym PaRDeS (a term that connotes the 'paradise' or 'garden' of the scriptural senses). This designation also points to the multifaceted truth of Jewish tradition, which can sponsor diverse meanings and truths simultaneously" (p. 65). Our study of Torah informs our insights about the deepest truths of life. Our insights about those deepest truths inform our understanding of Scripture and its interpretations. At each level of PaRDeS, we engage in this three-fold process of Torah study in unique, life-giving ways.

We Are All the Man from the Mountains

I suggest that because each of us is an utterly unique expression of *torah kelulah,* God's endless life-force in the form of a precious human individual, each of us necessarily brings different eyes to our understanding of life and our understanding of God's life-giving Torah. As Professor Fishbane explains, we do this as individuals and as a community that responds to God's voice from Sinai. Encompassing this theological activity is the compelling ethical expression of all this Torah study. Torah study means nothing if it ultimately does not turn into a program of compassionate, caring community responding to God's word and presence. I wish to demonstrate this by reviewing the insights I have gleaned about our Zohar text from my students.

It is intellectually dishonest to assume that the above text can mean whatever we say it means in its original context. Moses de Leon and his mystical colleagues, whose thoughts are reflected in the Zohar, were possibly polemicizing against their non-mystical rabbinic contemporaries, including Jewish philosophers whose rationalistic and allegorical interpretations of Judaism were insufficient for them. As well-educated rabbinic Jews, they certainly accepted *peshat, remez,* and *derash* as inherent aspects of Jewish sacred interpretation. But they were also a circle of esoteric mystics on a contemplative and hermeneutic quest for the divine inner life of God, the most secret truth of Torah one could ever know. They likely believed that nothing

short of *sod* was acceptable as Torah study at their level, and their elitism is reflected in the above, deceptively simple and "rabbinically flavored" parable. When approaching the above text, a teacher needs to make this clear.

However, once acknowledged, this Zohar parable, like all great Jewish texts, can and should be read by students through the multiple prisms of who they are, their own struggles, experiences, and insights, and their unique gifts. This is what Jews have always done with our sacred texts, and it is what keeps them—and us—alive, spiritually and morally. In line with the language used by the Zohar and by Professor Fishbane, PaRDeS is not merely a system of interpretive approaches to Torah: it also symbolizes the different kinds of human beings who learn from and live on the basis of Torah. Some examples will suffice. When I taught this text to my adult studies class on the Zohar, I asserted that the man from the mountains is simplistic, maybe even arrogant. One student strongly corrected me by saying that the mountain man may be simple, but he is not simplistic: he simply sees "things" as they are. This insightful comment humbled me. However, having obviously learned nothing from this encounter, I next took this text to a group of Judaic studies teachers at our local day school when I taught their in-service workshop. Apart from learning Torah with them, I wanted to see how they would suggest using this text in their classrooms. After I explained what the Zohar was trying to say in this parable, one of the teachers once again took issue, not with my interpretation, but with the application of the text in real life. As she explained beautifully, these differing levels of exegesis correspond to different children, their different learning styles, and their different ways of being "expressions of God" in the world. Some children are *peshat:* they are concrete, linear thinkers. Other children are more "drashically" playful, still others approach texts and life in a painfully self-conscious, philosophical way, and others may well be mystically inclined. Why should any of these approaches be placed into a rigid hierarchy of better or worse, deeper or shallower, more or less true?

Now I was truly humbled. Both of these pedagogic encounters allowed me to help my *ḥavurah* student and my (largely non-Jewish) group of college students to approach this text as a source for talking about multiple levels of religious interpretation and spiritual quest, while remaining honest about its historical context. Further, what all of my students and I "discovered" is the importance of seeing this passage's "geographic" setting as moral subtext.

The man from the mountains knows only the simplest things, such as how to eat wheat kernels raw without processing them. Presumably he has never been to the city before, and he clearly has never enjoyed the dainties deriving from his simple wheat kernels that can be found there. Huge geographic, culinary, intellectual, and cultural gaps exist between this simple mountain man and the more sophisticated city dwellers. Yet what do they do? They not only host and feed him; they feed him the finest foods from the king's table. They transcend all differences between him and them with *kavod* and acts of *ḥesed,* specifically through the *mitzvah* of *hakhnasat orḥim.* What might this teach us? Differences in social status, ethnicity, and geography in real communities become toxic when not transformed by the performance of simple human kindness, something that we learn from all three Torahs. So too, when left uncivilized by respect, love, and caring, differences in spiritual, intellectual, ideological, and emotional temperament in a community can easily poison the pursuit of Torah study—or any passionate dialogue and debate—at any level of engagement. They can too readily be used as weapons with which to shame our opponents, demean those who know less than we do, or belittle those whose learning styles, disabilities, perspectives, and limitations are different from ours. Was this the intended subtext of this Zohar parable? No one can say for sure, but it is certainly a moral and ethical message to be gleaned from a contemporary reading of this text. Further, it certainly is in line with Professor Fishbane's insistence that Torah study must be a foundation for caring, compassionate community.

The Talmud teaches us that we learn from our teachers, we learn more from our colleagues, and we learn the most from our students.[4] The wisdom of teachers such as Michael Fishbane, our relationships with our rabbinic and educational colleagues, and the rich insights we learn from our students, families, congregants, and friends help to refine us as people and attune us ever more sharply to the sacred presence of the One in "the vastness" of all that is. Together with them all, may we walk through the PaRDeS, the delightful garden that is our Torah and this life.

Notes

1. *Zohar* II 176a–b, *(Parshat Terumah),* quoted in Daniel C. Matt, trans. *Zohar Annotated and Explained* (Woodstock VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2002), pp. 2–3.

2. Matt, pp. 2–3.

3. As Matt alludes to in his endnotes, it is significant that "master of all these"—*marei d'khol ilein* in Aramaic—echoes the Talmud's phrase, *marei ḥittaya* "master of wheat," a metaphoric reference to one who has mastered Gemara, the Oral Torah as explicated by the rabbis of amoraic Babylonia. *BT* Bava Batra 145b asserts that "everyone needs the master of wheat," then elliptically explains that this is a reference to the student of Gemara who is indispensable for the people's "consumption" of Torah. Our deceptively simple Zohar parable turns this assertion on its head in what appears to be a polemic against rabbis and philosophers who attack—or at least ignore—Jewish mystics and their interpretations.

4. *BT* Taanit 7a, paraphrasing a statement of Rabbi Ḥanina.

Daniel Greyber: Originality and Density

In responding to *Sacred Attunement,* we were asked to assess how useful the book might be as a teaching aid and its potential to energize the theology of our movement. My frank assessment on both counts is: very little. Why? I will focus upon two objections: the idea is not terribly original and Fishbane's presentation is too dense to be accessible to the vast majority of Jews.

First, Fishbane's core idea is that God's presence is all around, ever accessible, and that the theological task is to attune ourselves to the presence of God through a life of study, prayer, and practice. He writes about how normal experience is interrupted and "the human being is awakened, if only for the time being, to vaster dimensions of experience and the contingencies of experience" and how the power of these interruptions "is to remind the self that the 'merely other' of everydayness is grounded in an Other of more exceeding depths and heights" (preface, p. x). Such an idea has found its expression before, both in secular and Jewish sources. In her 1989 book *Mindfulness,* Harvard psychology professor Dr. Ellen Langer wrote about "the psychological and physical costs we pay because of pervasive mindlessness and, more important, about the benefits of greater control, richer options, and transcended limits that mindfulness can make possible."[1] In his book *Be Still and Get Going: A Jewish Meditation Practice for Real Life* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2005), our movement's own Rabbi Alan Lew (z"l) calls these interruptions "leave taking" and explores how Jewish texts and meditation can bring us to a higher level of awareness of God in our everyday lives. In his 1952 book, Rabbi Max Kadushin wrote, "[T]he rabbinic experience of God can be thought of as normal mysticism. The ordi-

the world are necessary components of Jewish life. But they will only be meaningful, they will only be morally acceptable, and they will only survive if they are rooted in and inspired by the willing, daily choice to live a life of sacred attunement. To most fully respond to the experience of God—"if all existence is not God as such, it is also not other than God, Life of all life" (p. 34)—as Jews, Jews would look to Jewish tradition, as expressed by this movement: a dynamic, engaged, committed, and contemporary expression of the Jewish response to God.

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