

Why We Need Process Theology

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There are many challenges to being a liberal rabbi in the early twenty-first century, not the least of which is articulating an approach to Judaism that is meaningful and potentially transformative for the sophisticated, thoughtful people who might be tempted to enter the doors of my synagogue. The issue is not merely one of creating dynamic programming or fostering authentic community, although those are certainly important elements. My larger task, I have come to realize, is articulating a compelling narrative in which contemporary Jews can place themselves. Part of that task is to help Jews experience themselves as living within the mythic narrative arc of the Jewish “master story,” the liberation from Egypt and the creation of a Godly covenantal community. For this I have many tools at my disposal, from the lived experience of the Jewish year to the weekly reading of the Torah, as well as a two-thousand-year-old repository of Jewish texts that expand upon and elaborate that narrative.

But there is another part of the task that is more challenging. Central to the Jewish narrative is the notion of a Divine Being that enters into covenantal relationship with the Jewish people. Without a compelling way of talking about how the God so profoundly experienced by our biblical and Rabbinic ancestors is still active in our lives and in the world around us, our master story threatens to become little more than a nostalgic fairy tale. Without a way to conceptualize and talk about the Divine in ways that make both head- and heart-sense, Judaism loses its power to shape our individual and collective lives. And this is precisely what has happened for a vast number of American Jews over the past century. I hear from numerous people that theirs is a “cultural” Judaism, composed of a commitment to the past and some inherited sense

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of Jewish ethics, happily divorced from the problematics of religious belief. Yet many of these “cultural Jews” are deeply spiritual people who actively desire meaningful forms of spiritual and ethical practice. Judaism’s God-problem is keeping them from fully engaging with Jewish life and all that Jewish tradition has to offer.

Religion, Science, and the Problem of Classical Theology

At the heart of this challenge is the prevailing assumption among educated lay people that there is a fundamental tension between religion and science. At worst, they are enemies: The rationalism of science threatens the possibility of religious faith, and religious faith undermines the acceptance of fundamental scientific truths. At best, the two live in a kind of uneasy truce, with science ruling the realm of physical reality, and religion holding sway in the realm of morals and spiritual development. In either case, the disjunction between the two causes many people to feel that a full religious commitment entails some element of irrationality or make-believe.

Yet I am increasingly convinced that the problem is not an essential divide between scientific reason and religious faith, but rather an outmoded frame for religious thinking that relies on the metaphysical “certainties” of an age long past. Beginning with Platonic and neo-Platonic notions of the “perfect” as abstract and unchanging, and continuing through a premodern and Enlightenment dualism of material and spiritual “substances,” dominant Jewish and Christian notions of God are shaped by metaphysical assumptions that no longer reflect what we actually know about the world. I cannot imagine any modern person claiming that the actual physical world is less real than perfect “forms” that exist in the abstract—yet that was in fact the assumption of Plato and later philosophers in the Jewish and Muslim world influenced by Aristotelian neo-Platonism. Those “forms” were perfect in that they were eternal and unchanging—a claim that is still made about God.

Another premodern notion that continues to shape how we think and talk about God is the notion that reality is made up of “substances”—entities that are not reducible to anything else. In the philosophy of René Descartes and others, a fundamental distinction is made between material “substances”—the realm of nature and the body—and mental “substances”—the mind and soul.

This profound dualism takes on religious import when the same schema is applied to God: Just as the body and soul are of irreducibly different substances, so too God is irreducibly “other” than the material world that is God’s creation. The soul derives from God, and the body from the realm of the material, and the two are ultimately unconnected. Not only are these realms unrelated to one another, an implicit hierarchy is established: the intellectual and spiritual realms, having their source in God, are ultimately of more value, and holier, than the realm of nature and the material world.

These ideas, even if they may have originated outside of the Jewish world, permeate our texts and traditions. Even within Jewish mysticism, which in many ways challenges the rigid dualism of classical theology, there persists the notion that God is ultimately eternal and unchanging, and that the realm of the holy is by definition nonmaterial, with materiality (our bodies, our sexuality, the world of nature) at worst the repository of evil in the world, or at best an “illusion” that merely cloaks God’s (presumably nonmaterial) reality.

There are multiple problems stemming from these assumptions. Modern physics has upended premodern notions of reality being made up of eternal “substances.” We now know that physical matter is not an enduring, unchanging “thing.” Matter can become energy, and vice versa. A static notion of the universe has given way to a dynamic understanding of reality. While one could in theory make the philosophic case for an eternal, unchanging, entirely abstract God that shares no attributes of the universe in which we live, the “usefulness” of such a God is highly suspect. That is, such a God threatens to become little more than a concept, a disconnected divinity, alone and untouchable, with which it is difficult if not impossible to have a meaningful relationship. It may well be that the premodern notions of reality that were projected onto God were in fact meaningful for the people who first articulated them, but that ultimately says more about those thinkers than it does about God. For our own time, we need conceptual categories and metaphors for speaking of God that incorporate reality as we understand and experience it. In addition, as I will argue further on, the static, unchanging God is largely foreign to the Torah and other foundational Jewish texts.

Another significant problem is the dualism mentioned above. Classical dualism promotes a mind-body/nature-soul split that

has led to the denigration of our bodies, of the realm of nature, and of women, who in Western culture have been identified with nature.¹ This theoretical degradation has led to very real consequences, whether the plundering of the natural environment or the continued devaluation of women and what our culture labels as “female.” As we learn more about the intricate integration of our minds and bodies, as we begin to appreciate the diversity of human self-understanding beyond rigid gender lines, and as we seek to create spiritual lives that embrace our embodied physical selves, a Jewish theology that overcomes the dualism of spirit-matter, male-female, and God-world is an urgent project.

The ultimate problem of classical theology is that of theodicy—the problem of the continued existence of suffering and evil in a world theoretically created and overseen by a God that by definition is “perfect,” meaning both impervious to change and ultimately good, and all-powerful as well. It is this conundrum that tends to be most problematic for the people in the pews. If we as religious leaders cannot sensibly articulate a belief in a divine aspect of the universe that is both believably powerful as well as a source of goodness, love, and justice, while at the same time affirming the reality of the suffering in people’s lives, then we cannot wonder when those same people decide that the God they have been led to believe in is either a chimera or an outright lie.

A Process Approach

As a pulpit rabbi, as someone concerned with my own spiritual development and that of my congregants, and as someone dedicated to the continuity of Judaism and the Jewish people, I have been searching for ways to think and talk about God that make sense (that is, that are both internally consistent and consistent with our current best understandings of how reality operates), that resonate with Jewish texts and traditions, and that promote wise and ethical behavior. My assumption is that all human attempts to say anything at all about the nature of divinity are both limited and ever-evolving, changing as we gain new insights into the workings of the universe and as our minds gain new understanding. I am less interested in trying to “define” what God is, than to have available a set of concepts and metaphors that provide a frame through which to make sense of my own life and the world around me.

In recent years, I have found the school of process thought, and process theology more specifically, to be a powerful resource in this project. Building on the then-new discoveries of quantum mechanics, the early twentieth-century mathematician Alfred North Whitehead and his followers created new categories with which to think about God and the nature of divinity. The most fundamental claim of process philosophy is that every aspect of our reality is in some way “in process,” is constantly being made anew. In the words of C. Robert Mesle, “the world is finally not made of ‘things’ at all, if a ‘thing’ is something that exists over time without changing. The world is composed of events and processes.”² In this understanding, every level of reality, from the molecule to the human being, is a succession of “droplets of experience,” which in every moment incorporates aspects of the past while also making way for the new. Whitehead uses the word “experience” to indicate that at all levels of existence, the world consists not of little units of matter, but consequential moments of becoming—moments that combine elements of “choice” (that is, different possible outcomes) with the influence of the past and the surrounding environment.

For process thought, anything that is “actual” is in process. God, in that God too is “actual,” must also be in process, ever-changing and incorporating new aspects of experience. In Whitehead’s articulation, God is not only *in* process, but is also the Source of novelty, is that which makes possible something other than the eternal repetition of that which has already existed.

The argument of process theology is that the outmoded notions of “perfection” and “omnipotence” that have come to define our sense of godliness are neither compatible with reality nor worthy of adulation. One essential quality of an eternal and unchanging divinity is that it, by definition, cannot interact with its own creation. Meaningful interaction implies some kind of change on the part of both parties to the interaction. In contrast, the process understanding of reality implies ongoing interconnectivity at all levels of being. All life, whether electrons or humans, are “in process” in that they interact with the environment around them, are affected by that environment, and incorporate this experience into the next moment of becoming.³ So, too, does God interact with God’s creation, and thus we can say that God is in process. Far from diminishing God, this inherent relationality is at the very foundation of the notion that God “loves” us and “needs” us, ideas

that permeate biblical and Rabbinic theology. God's reality does not stand at an untouchable remove from the created world, but encompasses it, is in process *with* it.

The Process God of Torah

As both Jewish and Christian process theologians have noted, the eternal, unchanging God is most decidedly *not* the deity that we encounter in the Torah.⁴ From the very first chapters of *B'reishit*, God is portrayed as a Being that changes Its mind, gets angry and regrets, consoles and berates.⁵ Most importantly, this God learns. The Creator of humanity seems to honestly not have a clear idea of what Its creations are going to get up to. The first questions of Genesis—"Where are you?" and "Where is your brother?"—are real questions. Not that God doesn't "know" where these earthlings are physically located, but the Creator seems truly puzzled by their actions. Why are you hiding from Me? Why did you kill your brother? It is indeed possible to read much of the Torah as the story of God's ongoing attempt to learn how to live with, and through, Its human creations.

If God learns, then God changes—and the Torah seems quite clear, and quite comfortable, on this point. *YHVH* is awesomely powerful, but is not static, and the biblical God adapts and changes in response to the needs of the moment.

Even more—at the Burning Bush, God is described as the Power of Becoming itself. When Moshe asks for a name for the divinity that has called to him, he learns that God is called "*Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*," "I will be that I will be." These verses are a kind of biblical proof text for Whitehead's contention that God is the ultimate Source of all possibility and potentiality in the universe. In the words of our liturgy, *Ehyeh* is that which *m'chadeish b'chol yom tamid maaseih b'reishit* (renews each and every day—in every moment—the work of creation). Without this ongoing, dynamic Power, the created universe would be incapable of unfolding and evolving as it has been since the moment of the Big Bang. The God of the Torah, and the God of our daily experience of the world, is not an abstract, unchanging, and immutable Unmoved Mover, but That which allows the universe to unfold in all of its dazzling complexity. Process theology echoes this traditional Jewish notion and gives it resonance with contemporary understandings of the

dynamism of physical reality, and the truth of evolution in the biological realm.

Persuasive Power

Another key contribution of process theology is its critique of traditional notions of God's omnipotence. The idea that God is "all-powerful" is problematic on many levels. It implies the existence of a divine power that somehow operates outside of, or over against, the natural laws of physics and biology. Even if God is understood to be the ultimate Source of those natural laws, the implicit meaning of "all-powerful" is that God can abrogate those laws when and if God chooses (which is of course the traditional understanding of "miracles"). The other problem, mentioned earlier, is that of suffering and evil. If God is indeed "all-powerful," presumably able to do whatever God wants whenever God wants to, then why do tsunamis, or genocides, ever happen? To argue, as some do, that God "chooses" to limit God's power for whatever reason leaves us with a divinity that is at best arbitrary, at worst vindictive. To imply, as others do, that certain events only appear problematic from a human perspective, but from God's perspective all that occurs is "good," leaves us with no ability to discern what in fact *is* for the good.

Process philosophers point out that the problem isn't with God, it's with our limited human notions of power. God's power has been mischaracterized as ultimate *coercive* power—that is, the power to get others to do whatever one desires. There are two problems with this notion. The first is that such complete coercive power effectively rids all other beings of any power or freedom. If God truly has the power to control everything we do, then we have no real freedom, no ability to act meaningfully or to exercise our own power in any way. This clearly isn't the truth of our existence, and it effectively renders God's power meaningless—because how powerful does God need to be to exert force over something completely lacking the ability to exert its own will? From a Jewish perspective, human free will is a foundational principle—from Adam and Eve exerting their choice in the garden of Eden, to Moses' challenge to the Israelites to "choose life" on the plains of Moab. God's power, however awesome, is never such that it can erase the reality of human choice.

The second problem is that such a conception of power is immoral. It projects human fantasies of omnipotence—totalitarian fantasies—onto God. It turns power into the ability to control. Why would we want to embrace such a vision of power as ultimate, as Godly, as good?

In place of ultimate coercive power, process theology suggests that we think of Godly power as “persuasive power.” In this understanding, God is not only the source of novelty in the universe, but is also That which creates order, and defines the “initial aim” of all of creation. The “initial aim” shapes the trajectory of every created being, establishing its limits as well as the end toward which it is oriented. My own “initial aim” is to come into my fullness as a human being—not as a tree or a frog, each of which has its own “aim.” God provides the “lure,” acting as the influence that shapes us and urges us on towards our unique end. This urge and influence is experienced as persuasive, not coercive. Just as parents, teachers, doctors, or rabbis guide those in their care not by forcing their child, student, patient or congregant to do what they think is right, but through a combination of cajoling, urging, teaching, and warning, so might we imagine the Persuasive Power of the Universe exerting Its power upon us. This is not to lessen the awesomeness of Godly power, which includes the capacity to create our universe, but rather to reconceptualize how such power operates within the created world, and especially within the human realm.

In biblical language, God’s persuasive power is described with terms like *chesed* and *tzedek*, which are understood as Godly powers that human beings can either ignore or live by, in the context of covenantal community. Life lived according to these powers or principles brings blessing; denying or abrogating them causes both ecological and social disaster. Thus we can read the second paragraph of the *Sh’ma* not as the punishment promised by a coercive deity to its wayward charges, but rather as a description of the inevitable consequences of the Israelites’ collective failure to uphold their covenantal commitments. This kind of warning is one way in which the Torah describes God’s persuasive power, based on an understanding that human actions have consequences, and that only by understanding those potential consequences can we make the right choices. In Hebrew, God’s desire is also called God’s *ratzon*, often translated as “will.” God’s will is not something that

coerces, but something that desires, that lures, that urges, cautions, and cajoles. We are free to ignore it, but usually at our individual, or collective, peril.⁶

Such a conception of God's power does of course require us to relinquish some things. If there is no ultimate coercive power that controls everything, then we have to admit to a certain element of chance and contingency in the universe. We need to let go of our own fantasies of control, and our need for certainty. Process theology admits this, and indeed embraces it. Chance and contingency are real, as is the reality that with greater complexity comes greater capacity for both good and evil. The ability of an amoeba to suffer, or to cause suffering, is rather limited. But with the development of sentient life and human consciousness comes both the capacity for great joy and great pain, the ability to do good as well as the ability to do evil. The biological process of evolution incorporates accidents and uncertainties, echoed perhaps in the Rabbinic midrash that before settling on this world, God had to make and destroy hundreds of previous worlds. This world is not perfect, and perhaps never will be. Yet out of chaos there emerges some semblance of order, as well as beauty and good.

A Jewish Process Theology

Alfred North Whitehead wrote nearly a century ago, with the explicit intent to reconcile religion and science, to "connect the radical new insights of Einstein's relativity theory and quantum indeterminacy to our living sense of value."⁷ The process theology that developed in the wake of Whitehead's insights has been predominantly Christian, with some scattered attempts to incorporate the innovations of process thought into Jewish theology.

Contemporary with Whitehead, Mordecai Kaplan dared to suggest that we think of God as "The Power that Makes for Salvation," that we explore the notion of God as a "process" and not as a supernatural Being.⁸ Most recently, Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson has begun to more comprehensively articulate a Jewish process theology, connecting the insights of process thought to biblical and Rabbinic teachings.⁹

I am hopeful that Jewish theology will be revitalized through the encounter with process thought. Precisely because it is congruent with much of biblical and Rabbinic theology, as well as

incorporating the pantheism of Jewish mysticism (while removing the dross of medieval metaphysics), I would argue that a process approach is our best option for shaping a conversation about God that can both make sense to, and provide spiritual meaning for contemporary Jews. I do not know if process theology will do much to convince those who are adamant in their atheism, but I think it can help enormously when it comes to those Jews who want to make sense of their lived experience in spiritual terms, and who seek a way to speak about God that doesn't revert to outdated metaphors or irrelevant metaphysical claims.

There are, in addition, ethical implications of our God-talk. How we think and talk about God says something about how we experience the world and how we live our lives. If we continue to exalt Something that is eternal, unchanging, and exerts ultimate control, how can we accept the reality that life is a constant process of growth, change, and decay, and that ultimate control is an illusion? If God Itself is in process, is constantly evolving and changing, how Godly then to embrace the ever-changing nature of our own existence! If chance and contingency are aspects of a Godly universe, then we can bless the uncertainties in our own lives, rather than bemoaning them. If coercive power is no longer perceived as Godly, we can create a powerful theological critique of ideologies that exalt such power in the human realm, whether we speak of human power "over" the natural world, or the ways in which humans exert power "over" one another.

There is much yet to be done in creating this new approach to Jewish theology. A process understanding of covenant and of *mitzvah*, of what it means to be "obligated" when we understand God not as Commander-in-Chief but as Something which provides an "initial aim" and a "lure," is a critical next step. A fuller explication of how we can understand God not as "He," "She," or "It" but as Becoming, and yet at the same time meaningfully connect on a personal level to God as "You" in a Jewish idiom is yet another avenue for exploration. We can be humble enough to know that our understanding of That which created and continues to animate this universe will always be limited, while still endeavoring to shape a theological language that helps us discern our place in the world and how we might best align ourselves with God's *ratzon*. May the Process be with us as we do!

Notes

1. I am not suggesting here that philosophical dualism is the cause of women's oppression, which has varied roots across many cultures. But medieval conceptions of the hierarchy of soul-matter and mind-body have profoundly informed and reinforced an enduring hierarchy of male-female in Western culture, a theme that is also prevalent within many strands of premodern Jewish thought.
2. C. Robert Mesle, *Process-Relational Philosophy: An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008), 8. This book is an excellent, accessible introduction to Whitehead's thought. A good introduction to process theology is John B. Cobb, Jr., and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976).
3. "It is impossible for experience to exist independently: Experience arises out of that which is lived. That which is experienced from 'outside' us becomes 'inside' us, or, better, becomes part of us because it is taken into our self as experiencer. Every drop of experience is a novel weaving of the world of preceding experiences out of which that drop arises." Mesle, *Process-Relational Philosophy*, 43.
4. For an in-depth exploration of the resonance of biblical and Rabbinic texts with process theology, see the recent article by Bradley Shavit Artson, "Ba-derekh: On the Way—A Presentation of Process Theology," *Conservative Judaism* 62, nos. 1–2 (Fall-Winter 2010): 3–35.
5. A note about pronouns: Where necessary, I refer to God as "It" rather than "She" or "He," because I find that gendered pronouns contribute, even if unwittingly, to an ongoing sense of God as a big Person. If, as some process theologians posit, it is more appropriate to speak of God as "Becoming" rather than as a "Being," then we need to find a way to express this radically nonpersonal sense of divinity. While "it" still has the connotation of a "thing," it does have the benefit of avoiding the connotations of personhood that adhere to the personal pronouns "he" or "she." That being said, I still find powerful the use of "You" when seeking to relate to God. For the moment, at least, I am willing to live with the tension of employing a mix of personal and nonpersonal pronouns in an attempt to expand my own conceptual frame.
6. Process theologian Catherine Keller discusses God's power and the notion of "desire" versus control in *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 87–90. She writes: "The alternative to omnipotence lies in the risky interactivity of relationship. It does not toss the creatures into a deistic void, chilled but autonomous. It continues to call them forth, to invite.

In the language of process theology, it 'lures' them collectively and individually toward self-actualization. The power of God, if it is a response-able power, *empowers* the others—to respond. In their freedom. God's will is indeed God's will! But the term *will* derives from *voluntas*, from which also comes 'voluntary,' which means not control but *desire*. What God *wants*. That wanting, that desiring, has a decisive element, limiting in advance what is possible for this universe. And within those limits Torah, covenant, and the whole apparatus of redemption suggest that God's will seeks to *be done*. On earth. But to *want* is not the same as to *cause*."

7. Cited in Christine Keller, *On the Mystery*, 23.
8. Kaplan explores these ideas both in *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1962), and in his *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1948). Kaplan was familiar with Whitehead's work, although he barely references him in his published theological musings, resistant as he was to metaphysics or creating a systematic theology. Kaplan writes, "[Belief in God] is the faith that reality, the cosmos, or whatever constitutes for us the universe in which we move and have our being, is so constituted that it both urges us on and helps us to achieve our salvation, provided, of course, we learn to know and understand enough about that reality to be able to conform to its demands." Kaplan, *Future of the American Jew*, 182–83. In Kaplan's words I hear an echo of the process notion of "persuasive power" and the Godly "lure."
9. Artson, "*Ba-derekh*: On the Way—A Presentation of Process Theology." Other explorations of Jewish approaches to process theology include William Kaufman, *The Evolving God in Jewish Process Theology* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997) and Sandra Lubarsky and David Ray Griffin, eds., *Jewish Theology and Process Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).