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ISBN 978-0-88123-230-1



JOURNAL

THE REFORM JEWISH QUARTERLY

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LXII/II SPRING 2015

PUBLISHED BY THE CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF

On Being A Rabbi

"In the Process of Becoming": A Verse from Scripture Framed by Memories

Everett Gendler

Ever since my first reading of Exodus in Hebrew school so very many years ago, I have been intrigued by the episode in which Moses asks God for the Divine Name by which S/He shall be made known to the people. EHYEH is the terse reply: EHYEH ASHER EHYEH.

Even then the usual translations were feeble and unconvincing. "I AM THAT I AM"? Hey, give me a break. Even this beginning Hebrew student knew that ehyeh points to the future; it is not just a static term about the present. There began my decades long seeking for an English rendering that would somehow convey the dynamism of that Name, with its intimation of impossible-to-imagine, novel-events to come.

Reflecting on some personal events of 1962-63, I can easily understand why EHYEH exerted such a powerful pull on me as the Torah cycle reached that verse. I had just begun a six year tenure in Princeton, NJ, my first U. S. congregation, in August. That same month I was jailed with Dr. King and other clergy colleagues in Albany, GA. Events during the following months were comparably startling. In Rogers and Hammerstein terms, EHYEH was bustin' out all over.

Especially memorable was being part of a rabbinic delegation to Birmingham, Alabama, in May, 1963, to lend support to the black community facing the police dogs and fire hoses that shocked our

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"IN THE PROCESS OF BECOMING"

consciences and mobilized to action our entire nation. Follow-up talks for the NAACP in Oklahoma City and a temple in Kansas City were the backdrop to my meeting Mary Loeb, with whom I'll soon, im yirtzeh hashem, be celebrating our 50th wedding anniversary. What rendering of EHYEH could possibly be dynamic enough to capture such a dramatic sequence of events? What wording could encapsulate the sense of limitless, undiscerned potential that might lurk in any given moment?

As par-shat va-e-ra came around, I tried several versions: I am in the process of becoming that which I am in the process of becoming; I Am Becoming that which I Am Becoming; I am the Process of Becoming that which I am Becoming; etc. The permutations and combinations were obvious attempts to link this enigmatic report of a Divine revelation to Moses with the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, given fullest and most opaque expression in his *Process and Reality*. That daunting volume, based on the Gifford Lectures of 1927-28, represents a millennial advance in philosophical-theological thinking with its systematic, convincing substitution of Becoming for Being as the most basic term for understanding reality and expressing it as a whole. The significance of this monumental re-formulation for both theological consistency and people's day to day belief is the central theme of Charles Hartshorne's valuable volume, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (SUNY Press, 1984).

Don't be intimidated or misled by the title. Although the book is carefully formulated and meticulously argued, it is not a technical philosophical work as are most of Hartshorne's other publications. It benefits, in fact, from the "al regel achat" circumstances of its composition. Quite analogous to Hillel's rising to the challenge of summarizing Torah while standing on one foot, Hartshorne feels moved to summarize and apply the significance of Becoming to some common problems of popular belief. The occasion? Two successive conversations with intelligent, educated women who were troubled "by what they felt were absurdities in the idea of God" familiar to them. (ix) In response, Hartshorne spends five weeks trying to explain, with precision but in accessible terms, "process theology." He does this in light of having earlier experienced that "lives can be changed by showing that some of the traditional problems of belief—for instance how to reconcile the power and goodness of God with the evils we encounter in life—are genuinely

solved, or at least greatly alleviated, by the view presented in this book." (x)

Colleagues, although written thirty years ago, does this not describe countless of our own conversations with congregants? Obviously the volume was not available to me in Princeton in 1962, although both I and my rabbinate did benefit enormously from my earlier studies with Hartshorne at the University of Chicago while I was a student there. This later attempt at accessibility, although hardly an "easy read" (you should pardon the expression), is, in fact, comprehensible and over-all both convincing and helpful in resolving these profound, yet common, issues of faith that we and our congregants confront daily. It is also exemplary in demonstrating the practical importance of what might at first seem a remote theoretical matter. Becoming rather than Being as the foundation of a world view? The practical consequences of this momentous shift for our human morale, for our trust in the world and our confidence in the value of human effort, are evident throughout the volume. A few specific examples will illustrate the relevance of Hartshorne's thinking.

Straight to the point, he begins by listing and explaining briefly six common mistakes about God, among them that God is Perfect and Unchanging. This is usually understood to mean that God is not affected by the world since He (the pronoun reflective of a male bias that Hartshorne challenges), being Perfect and Infinite, can receive nothing from the world. But wait, Hartshorne asks, "Do or do not finite things contribute something to the greatness of God?...If you reply that the world contributes nothing to the greatness of God, then I ask, What are we all doing, and why talk about 'serving God,' Who, you say, gains nothing whatever from our existence?" (7-8)

The obvious conclusion is that "the traditional idea of divine perfection or infinity is unclear or ambiguous." Further, it denies our dedication, our efforts, our lives any significance, so that "persisting in that tradition is bound to cause increasing skepticism, confusion, and human suffering. It has long bred, and must evermore breed, atheism as a natural reaction." (8)

In like manner, he lists, analyzes, and clarifies other traditional characteristics of God that he finds unclear, ambiguous, or in error, among them the crucial notion of Omnipotence. The usual rendering, God as All-Powerful, is taken to mean that God is the

possessor of the power to "strictly determine, decide...every detail" of happenings in the world. This invites immediate objections: What, then, of human freedom and responsibility? What, then, of the horrors of recent history? Hartshorne clarifies and refines the traditional idea of omnipotence, contrasts despotic and parental models of power, scrutinizes the idea of determinism with full attention to modern physics, discerns "the significance of freedom . . . in the causal structure of the world," (23) and concludes: "The only livable doctrine of divine power is that it *influences all* that happens but *determines nothing* in its concrete particularity." (italics added) (25)

After a brief chapter on the Physical and the Spiritual that I found only moderately interesting, Hartshorne turns to an issue that was quite acute in Texas thirty years ago and remains with us today: evolution and creation. "Creation through Evolution" ranges widely and probes deeply. Among the topics briefly but illuminatingly addressed are evolution and belief in God; evolution, chance, and natural law; Darwin's mistake; chance, freedom, and the tyrant idea of God; God takes chances with free creatures; the religious opposition to evolution; God "makes things make themselves;" (73) and creation neither out of nothing nor out of matter. (75) In this latter section he introduces the vital distinction between consciousness and sentience, and explains how this affects our entire understanding of the world and its development. Involved in this, it turns out, is our relationship to God and God's very nature!

"In the Bible, God is not just an unmoved 'pure actuality,' in purely eternal fashion planning the very details of worldly existence. According to Genesis, the initial creative action took time . . . At each stage God received new impressions of the goodness of the result. And then, as human beings came on the scene, God saw something not entirely good in the result and acted accordingly . . . there was action and reaction between Creator and creatures. There was the Covenant between God and Israel. The whole thing was a social transaction. Even the relations of God to 'inanimate nature' seemed to take this form." (77)

Hartshorne had earlier cited Harry Wolfson's definitive judgment that "the scholastic theology utterly failed to express the Biblical idea of God." (29) In contrast, he notes, with process philosophy and its portrayal of the universe in terms of organism, "we now have a philosophy in which the social structure, fully

generalized, is the structure of reality." Both science and philosophy, so understood, view Creative Becoming as "much more pervasive and more nearly ultimate" than the static Being of medieval thought. (77) Along with this monumental change come numerous implications, almost all for the better, in relation both to our Biblical understanding and our contemporary theologies. Hillel-like, at one point Hartshorne asserts in italics: "Value and Sympathy as the Keys to Power: The Final Mystery." (80) That, in like manner, carries with it the clear mandate to go forth and learn further!

For our everyday understanding of the universe in which we live, it is important that there be a primitive form of sentience included within the primal matter of creation. This paradigm shift from materialistic-mechanistic to organic-intentional clarifies many of the questions that we confront, such as where/how did consciousness emerge if brute matter had no mental component, however tiny. A clear, understandable explanation of both the scientific and the religious meaning is provided by colleague William Kaufman in *The Case for God*, Chapter 5, "Creativity and the Cosmic Adventure" (St. Louis, Chalice Press, 1991).

I'm tempted to linger further on Hartshorne and evolution, especially given the fact that, as the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy reminds us, he is the first philosopher since Aristotle who is also a recognized ornithologist. Don't overlook his brief reference to his own work, *Born to Sing: An Interpretation and World Survey of Bird Song*. Besides identifying the territorial and group cohesion functions of bird song, he also provides "quantitative observational evidence . . . for the hypothesis that singing birds have a primitive form of what in us we call an aesthetic sense of musical feeling." (89) [The volume, published in the gold-standard ornithological series by Indian University Press, thus provides a significant natural phenomenon that is scientifically supportive of the view that the more logically coherent interpretation of reality is the organic-intentional, not the materialistic.

Early in this work, Hartshorne remarks: "God, I hold, is no mere abstraction." (9) The tone of engagement throughout the volume becomes even more intense in the final chapter, "Equal Love for Self and Other, All-Love for the All-Loving." (97) After some trenchant remarks about heaven and hell as well as an illuminating analysis of the question of personhood and abortion, he turns to "the two great commandments (as designated by Jesus): 'love God

with all your being (heart, mind, strength) and your neighbor as yourself." (106) Since these are the opening lines of the v'a-hav-ta (Deuteronomy 6:9) and the chai verse of Leviticus 19, his interpretations are at least of midrashic interest. They provide the context for a number of comments about aspects of God that have not been earlier addressed, and they prompt the evolutionary reminder that "God does not simply and completely make things, but brings it about that they partly make themselves and one another." He also quotes "from a Jewish ritual, God 'gives to our fleeting days abiding significance.'" (118)

As I complete this belated recommendation for a volume published thirty years ago, with a further nod towards one more than twenty years old, I suddenly wonder: Am I lost in a time warp? Have I lost touch with current reality? I am reassured that this is not the case by the fact that just published is a volume, *God of Becoming and Relationship*, by Bradley Shavit Artson, that emphasizes the radical, liberating effect of process theology for many of the most urgent questions of faith that we confront. Artson's book applies process thought directly to such issues as prayer, illness, evil in the world, injustice, the Holocaust, while avoiding the technical terms that might confuse the reader. While questions may linger as we read his responses to these problems---God's grandeur and God's guidance, for example, need further elaboration in terms of the process philosophy---he does not avoid the daily questions about God's world that all of us struggle with.

The quest for Jewish spirituality must ultimately involve us in questions of theology. Twenty-first century responses to questions of God need both grounding in past efforts as well as awareness of contemporary advances in thinking about God. I could imagine a valuable session at a forthcoming CCAR convention devoted to precisely this topic: spirituality, theology, and their interweaving. Presenters? Why not our rabbinic colleagues William Kaufman, Bradley Artson, and Norbert Samuelson? It would be a most fitting follow-up to the invaluable two recent issues of the *Journal of Reform Judaism* dedicated to an exploration of spirituality. Not only we, but increasing numbers of our congregants, are seeking such exploration and clarification. Never has the need been more urgent, and not since the Maimonides, I suggest, have we had such contemporaneous theological resources at hand to address this burning issue.