

## *Preface to the New Edition*

I WROTE THIS BOOK in the summer of 1970, and saw it published in 1971 by the Reconstructionist Press, the publishing arm of a small, intellectual Jewish movement with which I have identified myself since my student days. Two years later, it appeared in paperback under the imprint of Schocken Books, the most distinguished name in the field of serious Jewish publishing. That was the beginning of my relationship with Schocken.

When I go back and read the book today, I find myself experiencing two conflicting emotions. On the one hand, so much has happened to me in the intervening years that it seems almost as though this book was written not by me but by someone else with the same name. That other Harold Kushner embodied many of the faults and virtues of relative youth. (I was thirty-five when I wrote the book, middle-aged for mathematicians or basketball players perhaps, but still young for a clergyman whose stock-in-trade should be wisdom rather than brilliance.) He was naively confident of his views, somewhat impatient with dissenting views, and not afraid to venture a definition of God.

Encountering that younger version of myself years later, I realize how much I have changed. I am much less ready to reject or to define. (I recently gave a sermon in which I suggested that **the four most religious words in the**

English language were “I may be wrong.”) Yet at the same time I am impressed by how many of my youthful ideas still strike me as valid. More than that, I am astonished, rereading this book, to see how many ideas about God and His role in the world that I thought I was articulating for the first time in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (Schocken, 1981) were foreshadowed here.

If I were writing this book about teaching children about God today, which of my 1971 ideas would I keep and which ones would I revise or discard?

I still believe, and this is the central concept of the book, that we get into trouble when we teach children to think of God as a person, a Superparent who controls everything in the world. I believe that God is more than human, and I understand how readily “more than human” gets translated in our minds into “just like us only more so.” God as our Father (and occasionally as our Mother), who knows us, evaluates us, protects, rewards, and punishes us is an immensely powerful and comforting image. To speak of God as hearing prayer, to speak of the eyes of God and the outstretched arm of God, are great poetic metaphors. But I am concerned about the tendency of children to take metaphor literally, especially when it comes to such emotionally important issues as parents taking care of them and protecting them, perhaps the single most important issue in the mind of a young child. When children learn to think of “God as parent,” “God as person,” I worry that they will develop some unrealistic fears (“God knows what I’m thinking”) and expectations (“God loves me, so He won’t let me get hurt”). I have seen a book

about God for young children that actually says that if you recite a prayer before crossing a street, God will see to it that you cross safely and not get hurt! (It reminds me of the story about the rabbi who goes to his first boxing match at the invitation of his close friend, a Catholic priest. Throughout the evening the priest is explaining what is happening. At one point one of the fighters crosses himself just before the opening bell. The rabbi asks, “What does that mean?” and the priest answers, “If you can’t fight, it doesn’t mean a thing.”)

Most of the religious problems I have helped people with in my thirty years as a rabbi have ultimately been traceable to this tendency, acquired in our childhood and never completely outgrown (I still catch myself doing it), to think of God as a person. “How could God let that happen?” “Why didn’t God grant my prayer, when I offered it so sincerely?” “She didn’t deserve to be so badly hurt for one little mistake. Why didn’t God take better care of her?” Part of the problem is that children have difficulty dealing with abstractions. Even as ancient people used to personify feelings in their myths and legends, speaking of the goddess of love and the god of war, even as ancient people and children today instinctively see rocks and trees as having minds and wills of their own, so children tend to see everything that happens to them as occurring because someone wanted it to happen.

In this book I define God (for the adult reader) as “the name we attach to the fact that we find certain things possible and meaningful in the world and in our lives and the fact that we find ourselves stirred to move in the

direction of realizing these possibilities. . . . The name 'God' stands for all those qualities in the world and in ourselves which our religious tradition labels as divine, that is, as comprising full human spiritual development, fashioning Man into what he is at his best and most fully realized" (pp. 15–16). I still believe that, every word of it, but as I read it today, I find it a bit heavy and indigestible. When I speak of God today, I speak less of what He is and more of what He *does*, the difference He makes in our lives. Traditionally, Judaism has not had an explicit theology, a spelling out of what we believed about God. It has always seemed a bit presumptuous for us to sit around analyzing God and expecting the Divine Reality to conform to our conclusions. Its emphasis has always been not God's nature, the usual concern of theology, but God's demands. The question for the most part was not "what is God like?" but "what should we do differently once we have let God into our lives?" Theology has been not so much the study of God as the study of human beings tuned in to God.

My friend and colleague Rabbi Harold Schulweis of Los Angeles has coined the term "predicate theology." When we encounter statements such as "God is love," "God is truth," "God is forgiving," we should focus not on the subject, God, but on the predicate, love, truth, forgiveness. Those are not statements about God. They are statements about the kind of qualities and experiences we consider godly. They don't so much teach us about God as they teach us to recognize when God comes into our lives.

How do we learn to think of God as other than a person who lives in the sky? When I try to teach children about God, the first point I try to make is that God is real, but He is not a thing. "Can you think of anything else that is real, but you can't see it or touch it?" The first answer, for some reason, will almost always be the wind. How do you know the wind is real? Because it blows things around and knocks things over. What else is real, but can't be seen or held? Thoughts, feelings: love, anger, fear. Can you draw a picture of love or of anger? We can draw pictures of people kissing or hitting each other. So you can't really draw love; you can draw pictures of people showing love, and then you can believe that love is real. God is a little bit like that kind of feeling. You can't draw a picture of God; you can draw pictures of God in action, pictures of people doing certain things because of God—praying, helping others, being brave. Is God real? We all can think of times in our lives when God has helped us to do something difficult—to share, to get better, to grow and learn.

I believe another premise of my book is still valid, that the primary purpose of religion is to teach us to like ourselves and trust the world. We forget, from the days of our own childhood, and rediscover when we tune in to our growing children, what a fragile, vulnerable thing the ego of a young child is. It is so hard for us to hide our disappointment from them. We had dreams that they would outdo us, and they turn out to be a lot like us: pretty good at

some things, pretty bad at others, and not world class at anything. I meet so many wonderful, sensitive people who have never gotten over the feeling of having disappointed their parents by not being as athletic, as popular, as financially successful as their parents (unrealistically) hoped they would be. It is so easy for us, cruelly or inadvertently, to make children feel that when things go wrong, it is their fault. We have all learned the necessity of sitting down with children in the aftermath of a divorce or death and telling them "it wasn't your fault that this happened," precisely because children are so prone to blame themselves. I remember reading the account of a child whose mentally disturbed mother had set fire to him, burning him over seventy percent of his body. When he had recovered enough for doctors to talk to him, he insisted that he must have been a very bad boy to deserve this. He could not handle the idea that his mother was wrong and had done something irrational and cruel.

Maybe we can't eliminate the tendency of adults to snap at children when we are tired or irritable, or the tendency of children to hold themselves responsible for whatever goes wrong. But we can at least prevent the voice of religion from endorsing those tendencies. I try to be tolerant of other people's faiths, even as I expect them to be tolerant of mine. But my patience is strained when I hear the voice of religion harping on the sinfulness of all people, even little children. It is truly a cheap shot for religious spokesmen to tell children that God can read their thoughts and holds them responsible for their

dreams, fantasies, and unspoken anger. All we achieve when we do that is turn normal, healthy children into furtive, guilt-ridden sinners.

And it is not only the fundamentalist preachers, the upholders of the doctrine of "original sin," who speak that way. In recent years I have encountered several "pop theologians" who are usually identified with "New Age" thought, telling people that "nothing comes into your life that you have not invited in." Tell that to a child born with spina bifida or cystic fibrosis, or to the teenager crippled in an accident. Why should the voice of religion be heard adding cruelty to affliction?

It has become clearer to me over the years that the key to coping with the world, the key to overcoming misfortune and making the most of opportunity, is a sense of self-esteem. Think well of yourself and you will pick yourself up after a calamity and keep on going. Believe that you deserve misfortune at the hands of a righteous and punitive God, and you will say to opportunity, "I don't deserve it," and to misfortune, "Why fight it? It's my lot." That is why the first expectation we should have of religion is that it bolster, rather than weaken, our self-esteem.

Which brings me to the third point of the book that I would endorse as strongly today as I did when I wrote it: the idea that God does not send the tragedies that darken our lives. Rather, He sends us the grace and strength to overcome them. It is a point I make at length here, in

chapter four, and one I extended into a full-length book some years later. If you will forgive the arrogance of the comparison, I see this as a Copernican revolution in the way we think about God.

For ninety percent of recorded human history, people believed that the Earth was the center of the universe and the Sun and stars revolved around it. It was a neat, simple, psychologically comforting way of looking at things. There was only one problem. The more we learned about the universe, the harder it was to fit the facts to the theory. For hundreds of years, people worked out ever more complicated ways of reconciling fact with theory. Then, in the sixteenth century, Copernicus suggested that the Earth revolved around the Sun. All of a sudden, those complicated theories of planetary motion could be discarded. The facts now fit the theory beautifully, as long as we were willing to give up the comforting notion of our planet being the hub of the universe.

In the same way, theologians for hundreds of years have worked out elaborate excuses for God causing good people to suffer. Like cures for the common cold, there are so many of them because no one of them does the job satisfactorily. But if we were willing to give up the notion that everything that happens in the world is the will of God (what kind of God would want airplanes to crash or children to be born deformed?), then suddenly the insoluble problems melt away and there is no longer a need for convoluted explanations of why bad is really good. There is just as much suffering in the world as there was before (it takes more than theology to change that), but

we are no longer obliged to see it as God's will. If anything, we are freer to fight to eliminate it because we can now tell ourselves that God is as opposed to it as we are.

Finally, I would continue to emphasize, perhaps even more strongly than in my original version, the virtue of a parent or teacher saying to a child, "I don't know; that's a question even grown-ups wonder about. Let's talk about it now, and let's continue to talk about it as we both get older and smarter." When we learn to say that, religious education becomes a shared search for God rather than the transferring of information from a full brain to an empty one.

Those are the dimensions of the book I would keep if I were writing it today. What would I do differently? Mostly, I would make it a less specifically, less parochially Jewish book. When I wrote it so many years ago, I wrote it for a Jewish audience. Many of the questions, and some of the answers, reflect that. At the time, I had no reason to believe that non-Jews would be attracted to my philosophy. I have learned since then that there is an audience, Jewish, Christian, agnostic, and unidentified, eager to hear God discussed from a liberal, honest, psychologically sensitive point of view. They will accept my speaking as a rabbi, from a Jewish perspective (the only one I can speak from), but not limited to Jewish concerns or Jewish answers. I would like to think that part of the reason for that is that there is such a thing as Truth, however it comes wrapped and packaged, and people recognize it and respond to it.

## Foreword

I have attempted, in this book, to convey some of the ideas that I hold about God which are suitable for communicating to young children, ages 4-14, and to offer reasonable, non-supernatural alternatives to some of the familiar ways in which the idea of God is often presented, ways which so many parents have difficulty offering seriously to their children, and which may in fact be harmful to a child's religious development. The ideas you will encounter here are mine in the sense that I believe them and would be willing to defend them, not in the sense that I created them out of my own resources. Those readers who are familiar with the thought of Mordecai M. Kaplan will recognize the degree to which this book and its author are indebted to him beyond all formal acknowledgement. Dr. Kaplan's program of Reconstructionism and his naturalistic theology have provided me with a framework for understanding and explaining Judaism since my first days as his student at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1955. This volume is in large measure an effort to translate some of his theological ideas into forms suitable for parent-child conversation. I can only hope that his insights have been conveyed faithfully, and that the book meets his high standards of intellectual and spiritual honesty.

Rabbi Ira Eisenstein of the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation and the Reconstructionist Press has been a

dwelling Superman, a God who is actually “doing” these things with real hands and real bodily organs. We have no language other than this language by which to speak of God and we must speak of Him.

Let us agree then that we will continue speaking of God and use traditional forms of expression, with the understanding that we are not obliged to take them literally or be held accountable for the strict connotations of the word, as long as these expressions do not lead us astray. Let us give ourselves the same freedom of expression we extend to the weatherman, who is free to speak of sunrise and sunset as much as he wishes—as long as he doesn’t base his forecast on the theory that the sun moves around the earth.

If God is not a thing, it goes without saying that He is not a person, nor even a superperson. Despite Michaelangelo God does not resemble anyone’s musclebound grandfather. He does not “do what people do, only better.” He is a totally different order of reality than we humans are, not just bigger, better, or further away, but completely *different*.

Yet so much of the confusion, so many of the misunderstandings about God stem from this habit of thinking of Him as a pious Superman, subject to no limitation, not even to the laws of Nature. “Why did God do that?” “How could He let it happen?” “Don’t you believe that God *told* us this is wrong, and *wants* us not to do it?” Perhaps the greatest step toward a mature understanding of God is the realization that God doesn’t “do” things the way a person does them. He doesn’t “cause” things to

happen in the world, except in a special sense of the word, different from the way we use it about ourselves when we speak of our “causing” things to happen or our “making” things. It would be very pleasant to believe in a God who really did make things happen by the same rational and physical processes that we employ, a God who punished us for what we did wrong and protected us from harm if we deserved protection. But there is so much evidence from real experience contradicting this kind of belief that its proponent would have to spend all his time defending and apologizing for it.

If God is not a person or a thing, if He has neither shape or form and does not take up space, *what is He?* There is probably no completely accurate word in our language, for the reasons we have already mentioned. In order not to mislead, we would need a word used only for God, not for any tangible, earth-bound object and then we would have no basis for understanding that word. As a matter of fact, we have such a word—“God”—and we have difficulty understanding what we mean by it because there are no other things on earth to which we can apply it. But there are, however, words that point in the right direction. *God is something like a Force, a Power, a Process, a quality of relationship. God is the name we attach to the fact that we find certain things possible and meaningful in the world and in our lives and the fact that we find ourselves stirred to move in the direction of realizing these possibilities. We call God the force behind our growing and learning, our curiosity to discover and our impulse to share and to help.*

The name "God" stands for all those qualities in the world and in ourselves which our religious tradition labels as divine, that is, as comprising full human spiritual development, fashioning Man into what he is at his best and most fully realized. If Truth, Justice, Mercy, Generosity, Love are among the things we need to be genuine human beings, to be, in the Biblical phrase, men "*in God's image*", then the name "God" stands for the existence of these qualities in the world and the existence of a corresponding impulse toward them in every human soul.

The statement, for example, that "God is just" or that "God demands justice of men" doesn't really tell us anything about a being named God. But it does tell us that justice is one of the qualities human beings need to be fully and satisfyingly human. It tells us that we cannot realize our potential greatness as human beings *unless* we practice justice and are part of a just society. And it tells us further that justice is possible in this world, that the world around us and the human soul within us are not constructed so as to mock our strivings for justice from the outset. The same process of interpretation holds for all the other qualities for which the name of God stands. Belief in God is not so much a statement about Somebody living in Heaven as it is an affirmation of the world and the human beings who inhabit it, what they are and what they are capable of becoming. Belief in God means believing that the universe has order and direction, that it encourages human goodness and moral growth and that the impulse each of us feels to be a good person is a

“The unity of God” will mean the integrating of all facets of the human soul and all elements of society to work for these goals, so that all men and all nations will know what is good and will work *wholeheartedly* for it, diverting none of their energy to “other gods.” God will no longer be thought of as “our Father in Heaven,” whose approval we seek to earn, but will be the divine spark in every human being and in every God-oriented community, which impels people to growth and self-fulfilment. God will be, as the Rabbis of the *Talmud* anticipated, the “soul of the world,” with a spark of Him in every mature human soul.

There are some people, I know, who will feel disappointed with this definition of God. They might feel: “Is that all there is to Him? Is He just a shorthand term for my capacity to be a good person and the promise that I will find the world in harmony with that capacity? Why, your God comes out to be so much less majestic and awe-inspiring than the God I meet in the pages of of the Bible.”

I suppose so. I suppose there is something in each of us that would like to return to a simpler time when an all-wise, all-powerful figure made all the decisions for us and earned our love and loyalty in the process, a time when all we had to do was follow instructions. Certainly the tendency of a whole society in time of crisis to seek out a powerful leader and place the hard decisions on his shoulders would seem to bear this out.

But we know that if we are to grow to our full spiritual stature as human beings, we have to outgrow this habit.

And we realize that if God is not a person, if He is not an object taking up space, He can't strike down the blasphemer, He can't speak to Moses in a voice of thunder (in Hebrew presumably, but with which pronunciation?)—nor can He really “do” any of the things which, in the Bible, characterize Him as a mighty King and Redeemer. That comforting image of an unerring, super-powerful God is one of the things we have to leave behind us as we grow up and get to know the craters and pitfalls of the world in which we live.

Isn't there, however, an inspiration of a more mature order in the satisfactions of love and generosity and accomplishment the world holds in store for us and in the realization that the potential for such satisfaction is found in every one of us, in the knowledge that everyone of us is related to God in that way?

It's hard, I know, to give up the idea that God knows each of us and cares about each of us personally. Many people just cannot part with the idea of a “personal God,” a God who relates to us personally. If God is really God, they tell themselves, He will find a way of maintaining all the advantages of being personal without suffering any of the disadvantages. And yet the God in which I believe—God as understood in these pages—*is* in a real sense a personal God; it is not that He *has* personality but that He *affects* people personally. Let me explain what I mean.

Gravity is an impersonal force. If two people fall from the top of a building together, they will both fall downward at the same speed, irrespective of who the

ish. He doesn't distribute a minimum quota of tumors and heart attacks each day, choosing His victims until He has used up a day's supply of misfortune! He doesn't mark certain people for illness and disaster, and others for health and prosperity. Things happen for natural reasons, some of which we understand and some of which we don't. The human body is a very complicated entity; many things have to go right for it to be healthy and it is easy for some little thing to go wrong. That doesn't mean God judges you and gives you "what you deserve."

"God doesn't punish people; He helps people when they get hurt. A lot of very wonderful people have bad things happen to them, sometimes through no fault of their own, sometimes because they are careless for just a little while and the laws of Nature don't make any exception because they were good people. When misfortune happens, they call upon God and find the strength and the courage to go on living and working and make the most of their situation."

"Can God put back a severed leg, or reverse the course of an incurable disease?" No, He can't. There are laws of Nature which are the same always for all people. Sometimes, an apparently incurable disease does suddenly disappear, but it happens so rarely and arbitrarily—and not necessarily to the most religious or most moral people or to those who could contribute most to the world—that we can't say, "God has chosen to intervene."

God does give men the intelligence and the desire to help others—so that they invent artificial limbs and search for drugs to cure or slow down disease. He gives

the suffering person and his family the strength to console each other and go on living.

How do you answer a child who sees a blind

his fantasies and manifests concern.)

I suspect the child is afraid death is painful. He is unable to move or speak, but he is conscious of what people are doing to him and saying about him. People will close him up in a box and bury him and he will be unable to protest—a frightening enough prospect. We might tell him that being dead is different from playing dead. One doesn't see, hear or feel anything at all. The dead person is through with feeling pain or anything else. He doesn't know that he is being buried. We bury people so that there will be a particular place to which we can go to think about them.

#### "Where Do People Go When They Die?"

The first and most honest answer to this question is that we don't know; nobody knows. No one who ever died has been able to tell those left behind what happened to him.

In fact, telling the living what happened in death would be impossible, because when people die they no longer see or feel or know anything. They don't feel uncomfortable about being put in a coffin or buried. They can't hear what we say about them. What *does* happen to them? The body of a dead person is put into the ground very respectfully, in a special place called a cemetery.

When he was alive, the person was more than a body. He was also what we call a soul, a personality. He was good at certain things; he cared about certain things and certain people. Things happened to him and he remembered them. All this made up his soul, the part of him

that wasn't his body, that let him be him and nobody else. The question of what happens to a soul is a very hard one to answer, because a soul isn't a thing, a physical object which has to be in one place or another. A soul is a little bit like God—not an object, but a way of thinking and feeling, of making certain things happen. Asking, "Where does the soul go when a man dies?" is a little like asking "Where does the light go when you turn the switch off?" A soul doesn't *go* anywhere; it just isn't there any more, because the things which made it possible have been taken away.

And yet, if a man was a good person and people loved him, even after his body has died and been buried, people will still remember him. They will talk about him and be slightly different people because of what he meant to them. And if they remember him and act differently because of it, maybe that is the answer to where his soul went.

When people we care about are alive, but physically distant from us, when a child's parents are at work or away on a trip, we can think of them and feel their presence and it is a little bit as if they were with us. This is what the power of love and memory can do. Let us be comforted by the thought that, even when people are dead, we can summon up memories of them and feel them close.

Early in the history of religion, people found it hard to believe that when a person died that was the end of his life and they would never see him again. It wasn't enough for them to remember him and tell others about him. So

they made up stories about a place where souls went after death. In this place, the souls looked the way the people had looked on earth. And when the other members of their family died years later, their souls would go to this place—heaven—and recognize each other and be reunited there.

Of course, they had no way of knowing that there really was such a place, any more than we have of knowing that there isn't. None of us can say for sure. A lot of very fine people, Jews and non-Jews, have believed in a heaven and many still do today. But there are reasons for being skeptical. Firstly, people invented the story because they *wanted* to believe they would see their relatives again, not because they had any real reasons to think they would. Secondly, if the soul isn't a thing, if it is a non-physical object, how can one really talk about a "place where non-physical objects go and recognize and talk to each other?" A soul detached from a body can't see or hear, nor can it feel happy or sad, because these emotions depend on physical reactions. Besides, people who believe that souls go to heaven usually picture them looking the way people did on earth, so that they recognize each other and this raises problems. If on earth, a person was very fat or had only one arm, would he always be a fat or one-armed soul in heaven? If a man died young, leaving children who lived to normal life spans, how would they all eventually appear in heaven? A young father-soul? An old son-soul? A grandchild-soul older than his grandfather? It's understandable that people should want what was most precious in their relatives to live on, but the

most reasonable assumption is that their souls continue to live on here on earth only in the memories and actions of other people. Fundamentally, Judaism at its most profound has always taught us to take *this* world seriously, to try and live a full and rich and satisfying life in this world and let speculation about where the soul goes afterwards, if it goes anywhere at all, remain speculation.

### Reward and Punishment

Long ago, people speculated on souls living on after death, not only because they wanted to see their loved ones again, but for another very important reason. Life on earth seemed so unfair. Some people lived good and righteous lives, but suffered one misfortune after another—illness, bereavement, business reverses. Others seemed to "get away with murder." It was tempting to believe the story did not end with death, to think that beyond the grave there was another world where the good were given rewards more glorious than the ones they missed in this life and where the wicked were at last punished (or at least denied reward.)

Again, we have no way of actually knowing whether such a world exists. We can only be skeptical, try to find our answers in terms of this life and not depend on anything beyond it.

Are the good rewarded and the bad punished in this world? God does not punish, nor does He reward. He does not intervene in this world to pin medals on people or to change the consequences of their deeds to fit their moral deserts. However, He has given us a world in which