

# Longing to Hear Again

RABBI LEON A. MORRIS

FORMULATING A THEOLOGY for the twenty-first century requires far more modesty than earlier theological writings seemed to acknowledge. In the medieval period, theologians spelled out the minute details of correct belief with a confidence built around sets of proofs for the existence of God, for the reality of divine providence, and for the truth of revelation. In modernity such proofs fell victim to science and reason, and it became increasingly necessary to redefine or rethink our earlier theological ideas in light of an unbounded faith in the goodness of humanity and in universal ethics. While seemingly worlds apart, what premodern and modern theology shared was a posture of certainty, either about what God is or what God is not. In sharp contrast, our times are marked by great uncertainty. For many of us, contemporary theology is less about what we know to be true and more about religious ways of organizing and conceiving the world. If medieval and modern Jewish theology were prose, ours is a theology of poetry. In our time, “doing theology” is far more about meaning and elegance than a truth that ultimately lies beyond our capacity to understand.

With this in mind, theology in the twenty-first century can be understood as shaping religious narratives that attempt to reflect upon

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God's reality and our conception of the good life, while being keenly aware of all that lies beyond our full comprehension. With an admission that there are seemingly infinite ways of speaking about God, contemporary theology can be upfront about developing a theological narrative with an end goal in mind: the life that will be lived as a result of this theology.

What is such a life for our times? For liberal American Jews, the most urgent need of the hour is for Judaism to move us beyond the self and inspire us to transcend our isolated individualism. We seek to connect with the other, to form communities of shared purpose, and to feel a sense of genuine continuity with the Jewish past. Many of us hunger for a sense of commitment and obligation that is sufficiently compelling as to allow us to move beyond (but not entirely reject) our doubt and skepticism in order to give our lives a sense of deeper meaning and purpose.

As liberal Jews, the traditional claims of authority for our sacred texts are simply not persuasive if such claims are understood in their most literal sense. Our conception of God, and particularly the nature and content of revelation, invariably part ways from the most rigidly traditional perspective. While several generations ago such viewpoints constituted a radical rejection of core Jewish principles, for many of us the traditional claims (without being reinterpreted) are simply unconvincing from the outset. We know too much history and too much about biblical criticism to be able to seriously entertain the traditional claims of revelation. We see evidence of human (co-)authorship in each of our sacred texts. Commandments cannot be entirely isolated from sociology and anthropology and are thereby inevitably viewed as a human attempt to determine how to live in the presence of God. As a result of the breakdown of traditional conceptions of authority, the individual has emerged as the ultimate arbiter of determining a person's obligations. But personal autonomy has drastically eroded a sense of religious passion and devotion. It has minimized the role of religion in daily life and has weakened our ties to one another and to our inherited tradition.

This has been my religious dilemma for many years, and I sense that I am not alone. What is a liberal Jew to do if he or she seeks a vibrant, all-encompassing life of Jewish commitment and responsibility? A return to a premodern understanding of God and Torah is simply not possible. We cannot put the genie back in the bottle, and there is no desire to do so. The many gifts of modernity compensate for its challenges. However, we are painfully aware of how insufficient modernity's teachings are for shaping a passionate Jewish life. As Paul Mendes-Flohr, a leading scholar of modern Jewish thought, has stated, "We thus face a profound impasse. Modern individualism seems to be producing a way of life that is neither individually nor socially viable, yet a return to traditional forms would be to return to intolerable religious determinism and oppression. The question, then, is whether the older civic and biblical traditions have the capacity to reformulate themselves while simultaneously remaining faithful to their own deepest insights."<sup>1</sup>

A new theological approach is needed to help us to rethink and reclaim Jewish ideas and practice for an age such as ours. We seek a theology that allows for all the skepticism, critique, and analysis that modernity bequeathed to us while taking us a step beyond, to where the old language can speak to us again in new ways.

A vital philosophical concept that gives voice to this theological project is the notion of "second naïveté." The term, first coined by Peter Wust, a nineteenth-century Catholic thinker, but developed most fully by the twentieth-century philosopher Paul Ricoeur, is succinctly defined by Dr. Elie Holzer, a researcher at Bar-Ilan University, as "a critically mediated attitude toward the reality claims of religious faith."<sup>2</sup> The first naïveté was marked by the "immediacy of belief" in the traditional claims of religious life.<sup>3</sup> For us as Jews, this first naïveté includes notions such as God speaking at Mount Sinai, the Torah being written by God, and Moses receiving both the Written and Oral Torah. At some point, as a result of science, history, and source criticism, our original first naïveté was shattered. Ricoeur understands this process of demythologization as "the irreversible gain of truthfulness, intellectual honesty, objectivity."<sup>4</sup> Yet, Ricoeur's contribution is that this dissolution

of the myth is not necessarily the final step. Once the myth becomes shattered, there is a way for it to be restored as “symbol.” It is not a retreat back to *believing* in the original myth. To the contrary, it is a new way of *understanding* the myth.

Does that mean that we could go back to a primitive naïveté? Not at all. In every way, something has been lost, irremediably lost: immediacy of belief. But if we can no longer live the great symbolisms of the sacred in accordance with the original belief in them, we can, we modern men, aim at a second naïveté in and through criticism. In short, it is by *interpreting* that we can *hear* again.<sup>5</sup>

Interpretation, what philosophy calls hermeneutics, is for Ricoeur the means through which the old myths and rituals can be revived. The indispensability of interpretation for Ricoeur finds its parallel in a rabbinic worldview that understood the text and its interpretation as dual products of revelation. “Even what a sharp pupil will expound before his teacher has already been given to Moses at Sinai” (JT *Pe’ah* 2:4).

A second naïveté anchored in the act of interpretation argues for the renewed centrality of *beit hamidrash* (the study hall) Jewish institutional life. Its culture engenders the kind of questioning, debate, and dialectic that mirrors the stage of critique and demythologization that causes the first naïveté to be shattered. In moving beyond critique and questioning, however, *beit hamidrash* becomes a kind of institutional embodiment of second naïveté. In the study of texts in *beit hamidrash* previous readings are often superseded by new interpretations. Again and again, old ideas are reclaimed and ancient myths are revived through the active interpretative engagement. It is *beit hamidrash* that generates, and is generated by, the kind of interpretive process that makes the revival of myth and meaning possible.

*Beit hamidrash* is also a model for the creative exchange and interplay between the self and the other. *Beit hamidrash* points to the way in which the interpretive life can only be lived in community. If

hermeneutics makes possible the reviving of myth, then the community is an indispensable feature of a second naïveté. For example, German philosopher Georg Gadamer says “the task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning.”<sup>6</sup> Only through conversation with the other are we really able to begin to exhaust the possibility of understanding a text or experience. Seated across the table from another person, meaning and understanding emerge from the triad between the study partners and the text. If personal autonomy could be compared to a solitary individual sitting quietly in their library study carrel, then the model of *beit hamidrash*, with its hubbub and argument, serves as a corrective to an autonomy that is isolated and alienating.<sup>7</sup> In this way, *beit hamidrash* serves to remind us that autonomy is only the starting place, the unarguable fact that each person has the authority to determine the law for him- or herself. But as *beit hamidrash* makes room for community, a sense of commandedness emerges, and the classic dichotomy between autonomy and heteronomy begins to break down. Who I am is deeply affected by those with whom I engage. The experience of study allows me to bring all of who I am to the table. I am free to critique the text and apply all of my own outside knowledge to bear. But in the act of studying a text with another person in an attempt to understand it and give it meaning, a revival of this text has simultaneously occurred, and a community emerges with a shared life of symbols and common language.

Philosopher Ernst Simon “translated” Wust’s notion of second naïveté into a Jewish context and additionally conceived of it being the climax of three distinct stages of human-religious development: first naïveté, followed by reflective critique, followed ultimately by second naïveté.<sup>8</sup> While Simon’s stages refer to the development of an individual, let us extend his notion and apply these stages to the Jewish People collectively. When thinking chronologically about the passage from the premodern to our day, these stages take on new meaning. There are few contemporary liberal Jews who have personally experienced a first naïveté.<sup>9</sup> Most of us entered Jewish life long after a widespread

demythologization had already occurred. First naïveté speaks of the theological landscape prior to modernity. Beginning with seventeenth-century rationalist Baruch Spinoza, but culminating in the Enlightenment, the foundational myths of Judaism were challenged and shattered by modernity. Modernity was defined, in many ways, by the second stage of criticism and reflection. However, since that time, liberal Judaism has been unable to move beyond that second stage. The contemporary liberal Jew has yet to achieve a “newfound positive orientation [that] allows him or her to resist the total claim of critical thinking, to go beyond the conclusions of his [or her] rational self and explore new realms of meaning.”<sup>10</sup> Our embrace of critique has not yet been fully applied to the act of critique itself, as second naïveté calls us to do. For some time, we have been in the final moments of that intermediary stage, standing at the precipice but not yet having crossed the threshold to a second naïveté. To be sure, we have asserted that old rituals can have meaning for us in our contemporary lives. But our goal has not been as ambitious as a full-scale revival and reclamation. To the contrary, there remains today within Reform Judaism a great deal of ambivalence toward traditional practice, grounded in the assumption that a critical approach would render such actions unnecessary at best, and superstitious at worst.

To borrow two additional terms from Ricoeur, Reform Judaism in America has for more than a century exclusively asserted a “hermeneutic of suspicion” without supplementing it with a “hermeneutic of affirmation.” The latter suggests that we examine our texts and rituals in ways that would encourage their rejuvenation. Historical and critical perspectives would not be used to reject, but would serve as the background from which we would be engaged in a heartfelt attempt to embrace. This would mark a decisive shift in the orientation of liberal Judaism. For more than a century and a half, liberal Jews have routinely rejected countless practices on the basis of a sound intellectual defense (“this ritual still bears the traces of its superstitious origin”; “that commandment reflects taboos common in the ancient Near East”). A Jewish second naïveté will invite us to return to normative Jewish life in ways

that do not ask us to abandon our scholarship or historicism, or suppress our ability to critique, but rather encourage us to move beyond them, to discover in the old texts and rituals new possibilities for meaning, community, and divine connection.

Before being introduced to the notion of second naïveté I found that my own religious life bore out this concept, and I suspect this is true for many of my friends and colleagues. The acceptance of biblical source criticism does not preclude me from experiencing the weightiness of a commandment in the Torah. Knowing the history of the development of *Kaddish* and the relatively late emergence of the practice of reciting it for eleven months for a deceased parent does not eliminate feeling as though my late father's soul is dependent upon my voice in order to rise to heaven. A Jewish second naïveté allows for a vital merging of poetry and symbolism with responsibility and obligation. In acquiring a second naïveté, twenty-first century liberal Jews can shape a religious way of life once again anchored by classic theological constructs such as *Torah mi'Sinai* (Torah from Sinai), *b'rit* (covenant), *mitzvah* (commandment), and Halakhah (Jewish law). In reclaiming this language, our approach will be decidedly more oriented toward embrace rather than rejection, more centered around the community than the self, and more open to learning than to critique.

There is a well-known talmudic *aggadah* that stems from an overly literal understanding of the description of the children of Israel encamped at Mount Sinai awaiting revelation in Exodus 19:17, "And they took their places at the foot of the mountain."

Rav Abdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One of Blessing held the mountain over them like a bell jar and said: If you accept the Torah, fine. If not, this will be your grave. Rav Aha bar Jacob said: Nevertheless, they accepted it in the time of Ahasuerus, for it is written (Esther 9:27), "The Jews fulfilled and accepted." That is, they fulfilled what they had already accepted.

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This *aggadah* is vital to our discussion. The book of Esther's understanding of God (and perhaps the understanding of the generation about whom it was written) stands in sharp contrast to most of the Hebrew Bible. God is hidden in the book of Esther, and the sort of obvious salvific miracles that characterize the Bible seem to be absent. What could it mean then for the people of Mordecai and Esther's generation to have *fulfilled* the Torah? And how is such a fulfillment different from *acceptance*? Perhaps theirs was a kind of second naïveté, an assertion that the Torah could indeed be fulfilled in very different times and circumstances when acceptance is far more challenging.

And for us as well, it is obvious that the power of a coercive acceptance is long gone. The Rabbis no longer have constitutive authority. The sacred nature of our central texts is conceived of in radically different ways. Our conception of the relationship between God and humanity has shifted away from pure heteronomy. From this reality, a new way must emerge that enables us to re-embrace Torah and *mitzvot*. Our urgency comes precisely because we no longer experience the mountain being suspended above our heads and yet, like the generation of Esther and Mordecai, we long for a real and lasting connection to the generation that stood at Sinai.

