

whether God was in a state of anger or a state of mercy. They were most sensitive to what was going on in God.<sup>76</sup>

This is the pattern of Jewish mysticism: to have an open heart for the inner life of God. It is based on two assumptions: that there is an inner life in God and that the existence of man ought to revolve in a spiritual dynamic course around the life of God.<sup>77</sup>

1960



## A Preface to an Understanding of Revelation

WE HAVE NEVER BEEN the same since that day on which Abraham crushed his father's precious symbols, since the day on which the voice of God overwhelmed us at Sinai. It is forever impossible for us to retreat into an age that predates the Sinaitic event. Something unprecedented happened. God revealed His name to us, and we are named after Him. There are two Hebrew names for Jew: *Yehudi*, the first three letters of which are the first three letters of the Ineffable Name, and *Israel*, the end of which, *el*, means, in Hebrew, God.

If other religions can be characterized as a relation between man and God, Judaism must be described as a relation between *man with Torah* and *God*. The Jew is never alone in the face of God. The Torah is always with him. A Jew without the Torah is obsolete.

The Torah is not the wisdom but the destiny of Israel; not our literature but our essence. It was produced neither by way of speculation nor by way of poetic inspiration but by way of revelation. But what is revelation?

MANY PEOPLE reject the Bible because of a mistaken notion that revelation has proved to be scientifically impossible. It is all so very simple: there is no source of thought other than the human mind. The Bible is a book like any other book, and the prophets had no access to sources inaccessible to us. "The Bible is the national literature of the Jewish people." To the average mind, therefore, revelation is a sort of mental outcast, not qualified to be an issue for debate. At best, it is regarded as a fairy tale, on a par with the conception that lightning and thunder are signs of anger of sundry gods and demons, rather than the result of a sudden expansion of the air in the path of an electric discharge. Indeed, has not the issue been settled long ago by psychology and anthropology as primitive man's mistaking an illusion for a supernatural event?

The most serious obstacle which we encounter in entering a discussion about revelation, however, does not arise from our doubts whether the accounts of the prophets about their experiences are authentic; the most critical vindication of these accounts, even if it were possible, would be of little relevance. The most serious obstacle is the *absence of the problem*. An answer, to be meaningful, presupposes the awareness of a question, but the climate in which we live today is not genial to the growth of questions which have taken centuries to bloom. The Bible is an answer to the supreme question: What does God demand of us? Yet the question has gone out of the world. God is portrayed as a mass of vagueness behind a veil of enigmas, and His voice has become alien to our minds, to our hearts, to our souls. We have learned to listen to every ego except the "I" of God. The man of our time may proudly declare: Nothing animal is alien to me, but everything divine is. This is the status of the Bible in modern life: it is a great answer, but we do not know the question anymore. Unless we recover the question, there is no hope of understanding the Bible.

REVELATION is a complex issue, presupposing first of all certain assumptions about the existence and nature of God, who communicates His will to man. Even granting the existence of a Supreme Power, modern man, with his aloofness to what God means, would find it preposterous to assume that the Infinite Spirit should come down to commune with the feeble, finite mind of man, that man could be an ear to God. With the concept of the Absolute so far removed from the grasp of his mind, man is, at best, bewildered at the claim of the prophets, like an animal when confronted with the spectacle of human power. With his relative sense of values, with his mind conditioned by circumstances and reduced to the grasp of the piecemeal, constantly stumbling in his efforts to establish a system of universally integrated ideas, how can it be conceived that man was ever able to grasp the unconditioned?

The first thing, therefore, we ought to do is to find out whether, as many of us seem to think, revelation is an absurdity, whether the prophetic claim is an intellectual savagery.

IS IT MEANINGFUL to ask: Did God address Himself to man? Indeed, unless God is real and beyond definitions that confine Him; unless He is unfettered by such distinctions as transcendence and immanence; unless we feel that we are driven and pursued by His question, there is little meaning in starting our inquiry. But those who know that this life of ours takes place in a world that is not all to be explained in human terms; that every moment is a carefully concealed act of His creation, cannot but

ask: Is there any event wherein His voice is not suppressed? Is there any moment wherein His presence is not concealed?

True, the claim of the prophets is staggering and almost incredible. But to us, living in this horribly beautiful world, God's thick silence is incomparably more staggering and totally incredible.

IS IT HISTORICAL curiosity that excites our interest in the problem of revelation? As an event of the past that subsequently affected the course of civilization, revelation would not engage the modern mind any more than the battle of Marathon or the Congress of Vienna. However, it concerns us not because of the impact it had upon past generations but as something which may or may not be of perpetual, unabating relevance. Thus, in entering this discourse, we do not conjure up the shadow of an archaic phenomenon but attempt to debate the question whether to believe that there is a voice in the world that pleads with man at all times or at some times in the name of God.

It is not only a personal issue but one that concerns the history of all men from the beginning of time to the end of days. No one who has, at least once in his life, sensed the terrifying seriousness of human history or the earnestness of individual existence can afford to ignore that problem. He must decide, he must choose between yes and no.

In thinking about the world, we cannot proceed without guidance, supplied by logic and scientific method. Thinking about the ultimate, climbing toward the invisible, leads along a path on which there are countless chasms and very few ledges. Faith, helping us take the first steps, is full of ardor but also blind; we are easily lost with our faith in misgivings which we cannot fully dispel. What could counteract the apprehension that it is utter futility to crave for contact with God?

Man in his spontaneity may reach out for the hidden God and with his mind try to pierce the darkness of His distance. But how will he know whether it is God he is reaching out for or some value personified? How will he know where or when God is found: in the ivory tower of space or at some distant moment in the future?

The certainty of being exposed to a Presence which is not the world's is a fact of human existence. But such certainty does not result in aesthetic indulgence in meditation; it stirs with a demand to live in a way which is worthy of that Presence.

The beginning of faith is not a feeling for the mystery of living or a sense of awe, wonder, or fear. The root of religion is the question what to do with the feeling for the mystery of living, what to do with awe, wonder, or fear. Religion, the end of isolation, begins with a consciousness that something is asked of us. It is in that tense, eternal asking in which

the soul is caught and in which man's answer is elicited.<sup>1</sup> Who will tell us how to find a knowledge of the way? How do we know that the way we choose is the way He wants to pursue?

What a sculptor does to a block of marble, the Bible does to our finest intuitions. It is like raising the dead to life.

THE IDEALS we strive after, the values we try to fulfill, have they any significance in the realm of natural events? The sun spends its rays upon the just and the wicked, upon flowers and snakes alike. The heart beats normally within those who torture and kill. Is all goodness and striving for veracity but a fiction of the mind to which nothing corresponds in reality? Where are the spirit's values valid? Within the inner life of man? But the spirit is a stranger in the soul. A demand such as "Love thy neighbor as thyself" is not at home in the self.

We all have a terrible loneliness in common. Day after day a question arises desperately in our minds: Are we *alone* in the wilderness of the self, alone in this silent universe, of which we are a part, and in which we also feel like strangers?

It is such a situation that makes us ready to search for the voice of God in the world of man: the taste of utter loneliness; the discovery that unless the world is porous, the life of the spirit is a freak; that the world is a torso crying for its head; that the mind is insufficient to itself.

MODERN MAN used to think that the acceptance of revelation was an affront to the mind. Man must live by his intelligence alone; he is capable of both finding and attaining the aim of his existence. That man is not in need of superhuman authority or guidance was a major argument of the Deists against accepting the idea of prophecy. Social reforms, it was thought, would cure the ills and eliminate the evils from our world. Yet we have finally discovered what prophets and saints have always known: bread and beauty will not save humanity. There is a passion and drive for cruel deeds which only the fear of God can soothe; there is a suffocating sensuality in man which only holiness can ventilate.

It is, indeed, hard for the mind to believe that any member of a species which can organize or even witness the murder of millions and feel no regret should ever be endowed with the ability to receive a word of God. If man can remain callous to a horror as infinite as God, if man can be bloodstained and self-righteous, distort what the conscience tells, make soap of human flesh, then how did it happen that nations did not exterminate each other centuries ago?

Man rarely comprehends how dangerously great he is. The more power he attains, the greater his need for an ability to master his power. Unless

a new source of spiritual energy is discovered commensurate with the source of atomic energy, a few men may throw all men into final disaster.

What stands in the way of accepting revelation is our refusal to accept its authority. Liberty is our security, and to accept the word of the prophets is to accept the sovereignty of God. Yet our understanding of man and his liberty has undergone a serious change in our time. The problem of man is more grave than we were able to realize a generation ago. What we used to sense in our worst fears turned out to have been a utopia compared with what has happened in our own days. We have discovered that reason may be perverse, that liberty is no security. Now we must learn that there is no liberty except the freedom bestowed upon us by God; that there is no liberty without sanctity.

Unless history is a vagary of nonsense, there must be a counterpart to the immense power of man to destroy, there must be a voice that says No to man, a voice not vague, faint, and inward, like qualms of conscience, but equal in spiritual might to man's power to destroy.

From time to time the turbulent drama is interrupted by a voice that says No to the recklessness of heart.

The voice speaks to the spirit of prophetic men in singular moments of their lives and cries to the masses through the horror of history. The prophets respond; the masses despair.

The Bible, speaking in the name of a Being that combines justice with omnipotence, is the never-ceasing outcry of No to humanity. In the midst of our applauding the feats of civilization, the Bible flings itself like a knife slashing our complacency, reminding us that God, too, has a voice in history. Only those who are satisfied with the state of affairs or those who choose the easy path of escaping from society rather than of staying within it and keeping themselves clean of the mud of vicious glories will resent its attack on human independence.

How did Abraham arrive at his certainty that there is a God who is concerned with the world? Said Rabbi Isaac: Abraham may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a *palace in flames*. "Is it possible that there is no one who cares for the palace?" he wondered. Until the owner of the building looked out and said, "I am the owner of the palace." Similarly, Abraham our father wondered, "Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide?" The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said, "I am the Guide, the Sovereign of the world."<sup>2</sup>

The world is in flames, consumed by evil. Is it possible that there is no one who cares?

THERE IS an abyss of not knowing God in many minds, with a rumor floating over it about an Ultimate Being, of which they know only that

it is an immense unconscious mass of mystery. It is from the perspective of such knowledge that the prophets' claim seems preposterous.

Let us examine that perspective. By attributing immense mysteriousness to that Ultimate Being, we definitely claim to know it. Thus, the Ultimate Being is not an unknown but a known God. In other words, a God whom we know but one who does not know, the great Unknower. We proclaim the ignorance of God as well as our knowledge of His being ignorant!

This seems to be a part of our pagan heritage: to say the Supreme Being is a total mystery; and even having accepted the biblical God of creation, we still cling to the assumption: He who has the power to create a world is never able to utter a word. Yet why should we assume that the endless is forever imprisoned in silence? Why should we *a priori* exclude the power of expression from the Absolute Being? If the world is the work of God, isn't it conceivable that there would be within His work signs of His expression?

The idea of revelation remains an absurdity as long as we are unable to comprehend the impact with which the reality of God is pursuing man. Yet at those moments in which the fate of mankind is in the balance, even those who have never sensed how God turns to man suddenly realize that man—who has the power to devise both culture and crime, who is able to be a proxy for divine justice—is important enough to be the recipient of spiritual light at the rare dawns of his history.



## God, Torah, and Israel

JUDAISM IS A COMPLEX STRUCTURE. It can be characterized exclusively neither as a theological doctrine nor as a way of living according to the Law nor as a community. A religious Jew is a person committed to God, to his concern and teaching (Torah), who lives as part of a covenant community (Israel). Judaism revolves around three sacred entities: God, Torah, Israel. The Jew never stands alone before God; the Torah and Israel are always with him.

God as an isolated concept may be exceedingly hidden, vague, and general. In Jewish experience the relation between God and man is established as a concrete and genuine situation in finding an answer to the questions: What are the acts and moments in which God becomes manifest to man? What are the acts and moments in which man becomes attached to God? To the Jew, the Torah is the answer.

Jewish existence is not only the adherence to particular doctrines and observances but primarily the living *in* the spiritual order of the Jewish people, the living *in* the Jews of the past and *with* the Jews of the present. Not only is it a certain quality in the souls of the individuals but it is primarily involvement and participation in the covenant and community of Israel. It is more than an experience or a creed, more than the possession of psychic traits or the acceptance of theological doctrine; it is, above all, the living *in* a holy dimension, in a spiritual order. Our share in holiness we acquire by living in the Jewish community. What we do as individuals may be a trivial episode; what we attain as Israel causes us to grow into the infinite.

This essay, originally written in Hebrew, was translated into English by Byron Sherwin and subsequently revised by the author.