

This is not at all to say that suffering, extinction, oppression, and violence are not pantheological concerns; to the contrary, the abandonment of an *extra-cosmic problem-solver* is motivated in part by the need to take responsibility for the messes we make “Evil” . . . is therefore not a mystery to be explained but rather a concrete reality to negotiate and try to overcome.

Jewish theology has always been an intricate tapestry woven of many threads (or perhaps better: a quilt with many squares). My purpose here has not been to endorse pantheologies, but rather simply to argue against ruling them out of bounds. There are significant figures in our array of sages on whom we can rely for that. And whatever Jacob actually did at Bet-El, the way in which our forebears read that mysterious chapter—with its nocturnal dream of a ladder forming a tight connection to Heaven—is at the root of the complex, and never-to-be-resolved, history of how the people Israel has understood its God.

In the morning, Jacob wakes up from his dream and says “Y-H-W-H was in this *Makom*, and I did not know.” Perhaps, from then on, he knew.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z”) and Harold Hassenfeld (z”).



Vayetzei 5781

ויצא תשפ"א



The World in God

Rabbi Gordon Tucker, Vice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement, JTS

Our patriarch Jacob reaches a night camp on his way to Haran, a fugitive from the anger of his brother Esau. And then the text of Genesis 28:11 tells us: *Vayifga bamakom*. The New Jewish Version translation [JPS 1962] renders that phrase according to its straightforward, contextual meaning [*peshat*]: “He came upon a certain place”—a place that we learn was first called Luz, and later Bet-El. But while the *peshat* is the primary way of reading a biblical text, it is almost never the only way to do so. And the Talmud [BT Berakhot 26b] reads our phrase as a notice that Jacob prayed at that place; because (1) they had an example in the Book of Jeremiah in which a slight grammatical variant of the word *vayifga* meant “prayer,” and (2) they were already used to using the word *hamakom*, not only to denote a “place,” but also as a way of referring to God.

Why would a word that denotes a location in space have been used in Rabbinic Hebrew to mean God? That question was raised in the rabbinic period itself [Genesis Rabbah 68]:

Rav Huna said this in the name of Rabbi Ami: What is the reason that we give the Blessed Holy One the name “*Makom*”? It is because God is the place of God’s world. Rabbi Yitzhak said: . . . We cannot decide . . . whether the Blessed Holy One is the place of the world, or whether the world is the Blessed Holy One’s place. However, when Moses said [Psalm 90:1]: “Adonai, You have been a place of refuge for us throughout the generations,” we were taught that the Blessed Holy One is the place of the world, and not vice versa.

What may sound like an arcane issue of little practical import, is in fact a theologically audacious and far-reaching statement. Let me explain:

We ordinarily specify the location of things in a coordinate system (for example, by latitude and longitude, or by referencing a city's street grid). Thus, each such ordinary object has its unique place. Now, it is axiomatic in sophisticated theologies that God cannot be located in one particular place. That is, after all, the basis of the rather simplistic but sweet children's song that begins with the words "Hashem is here, Hashem is there, Hashem is truly everywhere." But that basic axiom is not what the text in Genesis Rabbah is conveying. Instead, it is making the bold claim that God **cannot have any coordinates at all**—not finite ones nor even infinite ones (as in: "Hashem is truly everywhere"). And that is because God *is* the coordinate system!

A charming, but deep, articulation of this comes at the end of Act I of Thornton Wilder's beloved play *Our Town*. The passage consists of a brief bedtime dialogue between Rebecca Gibbs and her older brother George:

Rebecca: I never told you about that letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: It said, "Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America."

George: What's funny about that?

Rebecca: But listen, it's not finished: "The United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God"—that's what it said on the envelope And the postman brought it just the same.

George: What do you know!

Ask yourself: Is God's place necessarily beyond us, with God above the fray, as it were, or is God the place in which we, and all we know, reside?

The more broadly accepted orthodoxy in Jewish theology—certainly in pre-modern times—was that of divine transcendence. God was beyond the world, separate from it, and unreachable (the actual meaning of "transcendent"), and yet, in unfathomable ways, able to interact at will with the world. So the idea that God is the Place, that all is in God, is a view that one does not expect to find in an ancient Rabbinic text. And yet, there it is.

When God is pictured in such a way, not as having created the universe from outside of it, but instead as *comprising*, being the address of, the universe, accusations of heresy often follow. Whether it is "pantheism" (in which God and the universe are identified), or "panentheism" (in which God does indeed encompass all other parts of Creation, but is more than that), such departures from the dualism of "heaven and earth" have called forth condemnation. Whatever was the ultimate cause of Spinoza's excommunication, he has been, and no doubt always will be, remembered as a theological deviant because of this. Which makes it all the more surprising to read, in the introduction to Arthur Green's anthology and translation of the teachings of the *Sefat Emet* (Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Ger, 19th–20th century), this letter that the Hasidic master wrote to his children and grandchildren:

The proclamation of oneness that we declare each day in saying *Shema Yisra'el* . . . needs to be understood as it truly is. That which is entirely clear to me . . . based on the holy writings of great Kabbalists, I am obligated to reveal to you The meaning of "Y-H-W-H is one" is not that Y-H-W-H is the only true God, negating other gods (though that too is true!). But the meaning is deeper than that: there is no being other than God, even though it seems otherwise to most people . . . Everything that exists in the world, spiritual and physical, is God Himself . . . These things are true without a doubt.

What a breathtaking teaching.

Clearly, we cannot simply dismiss as beyond the pale what Mary-Jane Rubenstein, in a recent book, calls "pantheologies" (the book's title). But, we may ask, what advantage can such departures from transcendent orthodoxy provide? For one thing, they can vitiate much, if not all, of the force of the problem of human suffering, since God can no longer be portrayed as a powerful but callous bystander, allowing evil to run amok. On the contrary, a pantheological view such as this must be behind the Rabbinic idea that God suffers with humans, and even goes into exile with Israel. Heschel identified this depiction of God's identification with human suffering as a source of great comfort and divine-human love. And, in addition, there may be an ethical advantage as well, and I will let Rubenstein's own words on the subject make the point: