

Rabbi Melvin Granatstein is the director of the Bnai Brith Hillel Foundation at the University of Rhode Island.

ARE THE IKKARIM INTELLIGIBLE?

The secular city is not so much a radical vision as a fact of life. The term "God" is increasingly irrelevant to the universe of discourse of contemporary man, and the claims of classical theism have been eclipsed in a world that finds them incredible. But the most devastating attack that has been directed against the tottering walls of traditional religion is that theistic cognitive statements are not merely false but unintelligible. Thus we ought not be surprised to read the honest admission of Dr. Asa Kasher who asserted in a recent article in *TRADITION* that "the essence of religion is not a subject that can be spoken about, but rather a subject which should be surrounded by sober silence."¹ His arguments deserve careful attention because they express the modern empirically-oriented temper and reveal the contemporary mode of discourse. This essay will present Dr. Kasher's salient points and will come to grips with the question of the intelligibility of theistic language.

Briefly, Dr. Kasher asserts that in any possible discussion the declarative sentences employed are of three types; directly intelligible; observational; and theoretical.² A directly intelligible sentence is a sentence "that any child can understand" within circumstances that provide "all the necessary information required for their comprehension." For example, "This is a stained bottle," or "I am hungry."³ Observational sentences are directly intelligible sentences "given a set of circumstances within which it would be *logically possible* to place an observer." For example, "The leaning tower of Pisa will collapse if one explodes a ton of dynamite on a site less than one hundred yards from its base."⁴ No one has ever experienced the circumstances requisite to prove this statement either true or false, but it is logically possible to

construct these circumstances. All such sentences are intelligible because it is logically possible to determine their truth-value.

But the question arises with regard to theoretical sentences. A theoretical sentence is a sentence that can be confirmed or disconfirmed, usually through a series of experiments within an appropriate theoretical context.⁵ But as long as this sentence is taken as self-contained, it is not only unconfirmed; it is unintelligible, for the intelligibility of a theoretical sentence lies not in itself but in its use.⁶ The theoretical sentence $5 + 7 = 12$ becomes meaningful when applied to the empirical world to calculate the sum of empirical objects. Thus theoretical sentences become meaningful only when we introduce what Kasher calls correspondence rules to bridge the gap between theoretical and observational language.⁷ Therefore, sentences such as "God exists" or "God is incorporeal" can either be linked to the sense world or they cannot. If they cannot, they are not merely inconclusive or wrong; they are unintelligible, for there are no set of circumstances in which it is logically possible to give such sentences a truth-value.

What does Dr. Kasher do with the Torah and its affirmations? He asserts that of the thirteen fundamentals of Maimonides' creed, one alone is directly intelligible—the ninth which asserts the immutability of God's Law.⁸ This is what every Jew can grasp and therefore must grasp as binding upon him. In one bold sweep Kasher substitutes orthopraxy for orthodoxy. Sentences about God's revelation, and Providence may be unintelligible, but God's commandments emphatically are not.

But alas, his solution, though refreshing in its boldness, will not do. For a religion, the cognitive claims of which are nonsense and whose commandments are yet imposed, is worse than blind. What is to happen to the soul of a people that is commanded to recite nonsense phrases three times daily and act senselessly most of the time?

When Maimonides asserts that it is a positive commandment to believe in God's existence,⁹ Nachmanides disagrees. His disagreement is not based on the unintelligibility of metaphysical assertions; it is because the belief in God's existence is not a commandment but rather the *sine qua non* of accepting the Torah

Are the Ikkarim Intelligible?

as Commandment.¹⁰ If Kasher is taken at his word, the ninth fundamental must go the way of the rest. The immutable Law of God is no longer the Law of God but only arbitrary convention. Kasher stands in the greatest danger of either lapsing into a “magical mechanism,” to borrow a phrase from S. R. Hirsch, in which each religious act becomes a somehow sacred yet meaningless mechanical performance, or reducing Torah to an emasculated functionalism à la Mordecai Kaplan. There is no way out. We must either defend the intelligibility of theistic claims or concede irrevocable defeat and retire to the pages of history.

It is with this in mind and with great trepidation that I suggest the following. First, let us distinguish sharply between Biblical accounts of God and medieval metaphysical formulations based on these accounts. I do not mean to reflect negatively on the latter but seek to avoid the influence of philosophical systems, the full implications of which moderns are seldom prepared to accept. Turning to the text of the Bible, we must conclude that it is free of metaphysical descriptions of God’s being. Attributions made with reference to God always seek to relate Him to His Creation. If, for example, God is called “merciful and gracious, long suffering and full of kindness and truth,”¹¹ this description is not a self-contained theoretical concept, but rather God’s relation to His creatures.

One might quibble at descriptions of God as one. Surely the affirmation of God’s unity, one might assert, is a metaphysical claim. I think not. There is ample reason to believe that what is literally meant here is not that God’s nature is unitary (though doubtless we believe this) but rather, as both Rashi¹² and Ibn Ezra¹³ claim, that God is the only God. Here too we are talking of a relationship. And if the Bible speaks of God as perfect, it is His work that is perfect;¹⁴ metaphysical descriptions of God’s being are not made. One seemingly unambiguous claim is made with reference to God’s being; namely, *Chai HaShem*, the Lord lives.

In the Biblical context, God is always known in terms of a relation. Here Martin Buber’s account of the I-Thou relation can be extremely helpful to us. The Jew is met inter-personally in a

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

relation with the living God and this type of relation is primitive; that is, it is one of the irreducible patterns of human intercourse with the world.¹⁵

I want to raise a seemingly preposterous claim. Anyone who enters an I-Thou relation with God finds this relation to be directly intelligible in the same sense that Kasher uses this term. It is intelligible because it is empirically verifiable to the man of whom it is claimed, "He has been met by God."¹⁶ In the sentence, "John met Mary," taken as an I-Thou relationship sentence, the question of whether John met Mary is verifiable. Just as John and Mary can be asked whether they met in an I-Thou relationship to determine the sentence's truth-value, so too can a man be asked whether he has been met by God to determine the truth-value of the sentence, "He has been met by God."

Strong objections can now be raised. Because I claim to be met by God does not mean that I am right. I may be suffering from delusions of grandeur. Perhaps I only "feel" that I have been met by God and my inference from this feeling to God is incorrect. Even more to the point, consider the following. Let us take the I-Thou relationship sentence, "John met Mary," and compare it with the sentence, "God met John." "John met Mary" is in some sense intelligible because we know what John is and what Mary is. But in the sentence, "God met John," we are in difficulty because we do not yet know what God is.

The first objection can be met rather easily. Granted if I believe I have been met by God, I may be mistaken. But John and Mary may also be mistaken. Further, the person who is asked whether he is hungry in the hope of determining the truth-value of the sentence, "He is hungry," may also be mistaken. All that is necessary for intelligibility is that it be logically possible to raise the question of truth-value in circumstances in which this might be determined. It is not necessary that the answer be infallibly accurate. Nor is it correct to assert that my knowledge of God in the I-Thou relationship is an inference from experience. Just as a man who enters an I-Thou relation with another person does not infer that person from the experience of the relation, so too I do not infer God from my experience of the relation with Him. To assume inferences is to return to the philo-

Are the Ikkarim Intelligible?

sophic mire of “feelings” and “sense-data” so admirably disposed of by the English analyst J. L. Austen.¹⁷ If we know other persons directly by entering into relation with them, in some sense we know God directly by entering into relation with Him. The second question, however, remains. We have not yet determined what God is. Granted we are met by *something* directly in the I-Thou relation but what is it that meets us?

What we would assert is that He who meets us in the relation is known to us as Person without being susceptible to further reduction.¹⁸ All that is necessary is that we open ourselves to this confrontation and the meeting becomes possible. The sense of entering a relationship with an irreducible Presence is by no means eccentric in the history of religion. The simplest of Jews have entered such a relation in the observance of the Commandments or in a moment of prayer. All that is required is *kavanah*.

We are met by a Thou that is irreducible, for nothing else in the world of sense exhausts this Thou.¹⁹ This Thou is non-natural in the sense that He cannot be reduced in anyway to anything else in the empirical world. He is what He is and nothing more.²⁰ Maimonides’ negative theology becomes extremely important here. Note that the I-Thou relationship does not define God, for God is indefinable; it only enables us to meet Him as He meets us in personal terms. We do not define God as a person, for personality is but one of His infinite attributes—the one He chooses to reveal to us.

Having recognized the importance of a determined negative theology, we should also note that we cannot deduce other religious truths from our direct knowledge of the Eternal Thou. Indeed it is altogether possible that the God we worship is only a psychological projection, a charge with which we are all too familiar. The importance of this formulation is not that it proves our religious claims but only that it enables us to talk about them. God is the Personal Presence, who addresses us at rare precious moments in our lives and the I-Thou relationship is our correspondence rule which links the theoretical sentences of our religious affirmations to the sense world of *she’mirat hamitzvot*. It is now possible to say intelligibly that God addressed us in the Exodus from Egypt, that it is our Redeemer that gives us the

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

world as a gift in Creation, and in spite of Buber, that gave us the Torah at Sinai. And this I believe is all that is necessary to make the cognitive claims of theism intelligible.

Do we have sufficient warrant to make such claims? This is a topic in itself, but at least we have established the ground rules of our universe of discourse. We turn again to the strictures of Nachmanides on Maimonides' enumeration of the Commandments. In accepting God's sovereignty through His relationship with us, what would otherwise be arbitrary convention, becomes Commandment. Affirmation of God's existence may not indeed be a Commandment but it is what makes for all Commandments.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Fundamental Assumptions for Discussions on Religion and Science," translated by Lawrence Kaplan, *Tradition*, Vol. X, No. 1, Summer, 1968, p. 98.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 89-91.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

9. Maimonides, *Sefer HaMitzvot*, Mitzvot Aseh, Mitzvah Aleph.

10. *Hasagot Ha'Ramban* on Mitzvah Aleph.

... וכן בדברי רז"ל שהוא קבלת מלכותו ית'. והיא האמונה באלקות . . .
כשיקבלו מלכותי אזנור עליהם גזרות שאם מלכותי אינם מקבלים גזרות היאך
מקיימים?"

cf. *Mechilta de'R. Yishmael*, ed. Meir Ish-Shalom (Vienna Rabbinical Seminary, Vienna, 1870), *Mesichta d'B'Hodesh*, Parshah vav, p. 67.

11. Exodus 34:6.

12. Rashi on Deuteronomy 6:4. " . . . הוא עתיד להיות ד' אחד"

13. Ibn Ezra. " . . . והמעם לבדו" see also Rashbam.

cf. *The Torah; A New Translation*, ed. Harry M. Orlinsky, (J.P.S. 1962), p. 336. Translation reads "Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone."

14. E.g. Deuteronomy 32:4.

15. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. by Ronald Gregor Smith (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 3.

16. An extremely suggestive article on this theme has been written by Emil Fackenheim in *Commentary* entitled "On The Eclipse of God." June 1964, Vol. XXXVII, No. 6, pp. 55-60.

Are the Ikkarim Intelligible?

17. J. L. Austen, *Sense and Sensibilia*, ed. by G. J. Warnock, (Oxford University Press, 1964). See also Buber's refutation of the experiential theories of Schleiermacher and Otto in *I and Thou*, p. 81.

18. *I and Thou*, p. 175. "The concept of personal being is indeed completely incapable of declaring what God's essential being is, but it is both permitted and necessary to say that God is also a Person."

19. *Ibid.*, p. 112. "The Eternal Thou can by its nature not become it; . . . for it can be found neither experienced or thought . . ." cf. p. 136. where God is described as ". . . the Person who cannot be limited."

20. *Ibid.*, p. 112. "That which reveals is that which reveals."