BOOK REVIEW

Abraham's Promise:
Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations
by MICHAEL WYSCHOGROD
(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004),
253 pages.

Reviewed by
Aryeh Klapper

Michael Wyschogrod may be the Judah ha-Levi of contemporary American Orthodoxy. He writes genuinely Jewish theology with a poetic sensibility, alive to the joy and importance of metaphor and experience. His Orthodoxy is unapologetic and his faith unqualified. His common sense is informed and deepened, rather than overwhelmed, by his command of the Western philosophic tradition.

Wyschogrod's writing is lucid, compact, and at times beautiful. Consider the following sentences:

> There is no salvation to be extracted from the Holocaust, no faltering Judaism can be revived by it, no new reason for the continuation of the Jewish people can be found in it. If there is hope after the Holocaust, it is because to those who believe, the voices of the Prophets speak more loudly than did Hitler, and because the divine promise sweeps over the crematoria and silences the voice of Auschwitz. (119-120)

This is a voice that deserves our attention.

The appearance of *Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*, a first collection of Wyschogrod's articles, is therefore cause for celebration, both for its own sake and because it should stir renewed interest in his magnum opus, *The Body of Faith*. It is also cause for both shame and pride, as this first and belated anthology is edited by—and seems largely produced for—Christians. While we can *shep nahas* that one of our own is so respected outside our community, I hope that somewhere a Jewish publishing house is scrambling to publish its own assemblage of "Wyschogrodia".

Among the reasons that this has not happened, as Wyschogrod himself acknowledges in the collection's concluding essay, "The Dialogue with Christianity and My Self-Understanding as a Jew" is that "there is probably no more efficient method of committing Orthodox Jewish sui-

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cide than admitting that any part of my interpretation of Judaism is the result of contact with Christianity." (225) I'm not certain that it is the most efficient method, but as Robert Frost would have it, it "is also great and would suffice." Wyschogrod admits the charge of Christian influence, and indeed a cursory glance at almost any chapter proves its truth. His defense is that the results are nonetheless Jewishly licit.

While, in general, little good and much harm is done by trying ideas for heresy, it seems clear to me that in this case the question must be raised, if only because absent an acquittal, Wyschogrod's ideas are unlikely to receive fair hearing from his intended audience, and, as he writes in the preface to the second edition of *Body of Faith*, "Ultimately it is the Torah-obedient Jewish community that judges a work of Jewish thought."[1] But let us present the evidence before deliberating, let alone reaching a verdict.

The engine that drives almost every element of Wyschogrod's thought is the centrality of embodied human experience for Judaism. This idea ramifies in often surprising ways. For example, one semi-whimsical essay in this collection, entitled "The Revenge of the Animals" argues that it was not unreasonable for God to anticipate that Adam would find companionship among the animals, and that the snake's seduction of Eve was intended to displace a rival rather than to rebel against God. But its most important ramification is that the relationship between God and Israel is one of unconditional love, *ahava she-eina teluya be-davar*.

Here, a subtle and important distinction is necessary. *Ahava she-eina teluya be-davar* is often understood as causeless or unmotivated love; in the Christian tradition as agape, contrasted with eros. This is rendered in English as an opposition between love and lust, with the operative distinction being that lust is rooted in desire, and desire reflects a lack in the desirer. It follows for most theologians that God's love cannot be eros. Wyschogrod argues, however, that God's love is motivated but unconditional. The Divine desire for relationship is indeed eros, but eros is not necessarily conditional. One can desire another's happiness and another's love without making one's own love dependent on it.

The clearest evidence for this claim is the Song of Songs (*Shir ha-Shirim*). Understood as an allegory of the relationship between God and Israel, the Song establishes a parallel between Divine and human love. Human love is grounded in an appreciation of the uniqueness of the loved individual and in an exclusion of the unloved from the love-relationship. If God, for His own reasons—and Wyschogrod empha-

sizes repeatedly his commitment to God's absolute freedom and the consequent contingency of all Divine actions—wishes the experience of human love, then His love as well must be of uniqueness rather than of a type, must exclude as well as include, and need not be based on objective merit. Thus, the claim that God chose the Jews as objects of His special love does not require a claim of superiority, nor must it mean that God fails to love non-Jews.[2]

The recognition that God's love for the Jews is unconditional enables the Jewish people to love Him equally unconditionally. Thus, Wyschogrod believes that we Jews engage in theodicy not to solve the theological problem of evil, but rather to quench our desire to know the Beloved. It is our faith in the relationship, rather than in justice, that should convince us that everything is purposeful and ultimate redemption assured.

If God can desire, there is, *kal va-homer*, no barrier to ascribing to Him all other manner of emotions as well. Once one takes biblical descriptions of Divine emotions as genuinely descriptive, notions of Divine simplicity and unity have diminished significance. Once one is willing to see God as emotional and complex, the motives for philosophic reinterpretation of what seemed embarrassingly un-philosophic biblical descriptions of God fall away.

Wyschogrod thus finds himself in fundamental conflict with the Maimonidean unreading of anthropomorphism in the Bible. In both *Abraham's Promise* and *The Body of Faith*, he uses a study of the opening verse of the *Shema* to denounce what he sees as a noxious Parmenidean influence that underlies many Maimonidean contentions, particularly including negative theology and the notion of God's utter simplicity.

Parmenides, in Wyschogrod's account, argues that non-being cannot be thought—one cannot meaningfully state that anything does not exist. Thus one cannot meaningfully say, for example, that unicorns do not exist. More powerfully, one cannot meaningfully say that unicorns are not purple, as that is equivalent to saying that the purpleness of unicorns does not exist. It follows that all distinctions, which involve declaring that *alef* is true of *x* whereas it is not true of *y* (or "does not be with regard to *y*"), are illusory, and ultimately there is only undifferentiated necessary being, or what Maimonides called God.

Wyschogrod contends that the *Shema* declares that God is unique and in no way entails His simplicity, as His uniqueness suffices to make Him the unique subject of legitimate worship. This leads him to the conclusion that:

> In the final analysis, then, the Jewish understanding of God is intact so long as no power or structure is posited that is equal to God and that is in a position to oppose successfully the will of God. In spite of all the difficulties that Christian trinitarian teaching poses for Judaism, the absence of the theme of conflict among the persons of the Trinity maintains trinitarianism as a problem for rather than a complete break with Judaism (42).

The talmudic parallelism of the *ehad*-ness of God in the *Shema* with the *ehad*-ness of Israel in Chronicles I (17:21) then teaches us that God relates to the Jewish people uniquely. Wyschogrod argues—though this argument does not approach his usual standard—that God's relationship with the Jews can be understood as implying that the Jews manifest God in the world. Accordingly,

> The Christian teaching of the incarnation of God in Jesus is the intensification of the teaching of the indwelling of God in Israel by concentrating that indwelling in one Jew rather than leaving it diffused in the people of Jesus as a whole (178).

Thus far, the evidence. Let us begin the deliberation.

In *Major Themes in Modern Philosophies of Judaism*, Eliezer Berkovits published a devastating critique of what is nonetheless one of the great works of recent Jewish theology, Abraham Joshua Heschel's *God in Search of Man*. Wyschogrod and Heschel share little in the way of content and even sensibility, but both fundamentally seek to undo the complete rationalization of God in Judaism that Maimonides championed. For that reason, Berkovits's conclusion is worth citing here, perhaps in lieu of a prosecutor's summation:

> In the context of Judaism . . . we start out with a faith that abhors any form of "humanization" of Divine nature; the theological climate is determined by a long tradition of affirmation of Divine impassibility in face of numerous biblical texts to the contrary. Dr. Heschel, however, decided to take some anthropathetic expressions in the Bible literally. In the light of his own interpretations of those passages he formulates a theology; in the light of his theology he then proceeds to offer us a God who is "all-personal" and "absolutely personal" who, since "the attitudes of man may affect the life of God" should be understood with the help of "a certain analogy between Creator and creature." From the Jewish point of view, these are alien and objectionable concepts. To have a faith in a passible God and to proceed from there in order to formulate an adequate theology is one thing; but to conceive of an "original"

> interpretation of Biblical expressions and to proceed from there, by way of a questionable theology, to a formulation of the concept of a God of pathos is something completely different. Given the Christian premise, a theology of pathos is an intellectual necessity; given the premises of Judaism, Dr. Heschel's theology of pathos and religion of sympathy seem to be offsprings of a theologically oriented fancy.

It seems to me that this critique can be applied almost verbatim to Wyschogrod's work. We need then to decide whether, or to what degree, it compels us.

The issue of origins seems to me unverifiable, and therefore unproductive to pursue. The major elements of the critique, then, are: first, that a theology based directly on Tanakh, or perhaps even on Tanakh and Hazal, is not Jewishly legitimate if it goes against an established traditional reading, and second, that Maimonides' strong opposition to the attribution of emotion and desire to God has become such an established traditional reading.

The second element seems to me strongly overstated. Elements of Hasidic literature constitute a genuine ground for Heschel's "theology of pathos" and one might see both Wyschogrod and Heschel as offering philosophic presentations of Hasidut. Also, the cultural dominance of Rashi's commentary on the Torah has always ensured that the God of Israel is conceived of in midrashic as well as philosophic terms. It seems to me that the anthropathetic elements of midrash cited in Rashi have been traditionally read as literal, or in the spirit of *ke-veyakhol*, rather than as allegory.

But Wyschogrod does not present himself as the heir to such traditions. Rather, he self-describes as an explicitly biblical theologian offering original ideas that are compatible with Orthodox Jewish practice and tradition. His philosophic critique of Rambam goes so far as to explicitly deny the second of the Thirteen Principles of Faith, God's utter simplicity. If one adopts the position that those principles have assumed halakhic force, such that denial of any of them is ipso facto heresy and defines one halakhically as an apikores or heretic, the verdict regarding Wyschogrod's work is clear.

My own position, however, is that this should not be the case. Marc Shapiro's book (based on his article in *The Torah U'Madda Journal*) have been invaluable, both in demonstrating that it has not been the case, and in preventing it from becoming the case.[3]

The remaining question, then, is whether or not the process by which Wyschogrod arrives at his conclusions invalidates them, either

because he borrows liberally from Christian tradition or because he does not ground himself in a thorough analysis of rabbinic tradition.

For the first charge, one could deploy competing traditional proof-texts, and the simplest course of action would be to record that this has been a matter of controversy for at least a millennium. For Modern Orthodoxy, however, the example of the Rav should compel us to say that to be influenced by Christian theologians is not ipso facto invalidating.

On the second point, it seems to me that we need to distinguish between acceptability and authority. A true idea cannot be invalidated owing to its origin, but an idea derived non-masoretically has no status beyond the force of the reader's own evaluation of its relationship to Jewish tradition. It is not presumptively licit, and cannot be relied upon by those without access to the primary sources. The fate, or destiny, of Wyschogrod's ideas within Judaism will therefore depend on whether others choose to weave his ideas into the Tradition. But this is no different than the status of most *peshat*-commentary.

Some brief notes on specific essays and issues are appropriate in closing. "A Jewish Death in Heidelberg" is a simply beautiful narrative exploration of how one communicates the meaning of Jewish identity, but the weak choice and analysis of sources in the essay on "Judaism and Conscience" make it an almost total failure. Also, Wyschogrod states several times that his account of Jewishness would be invalidated by large-scale intra-Jewish violence. It is therefore not clear how he accounts for the divided monarchy and occasional intra-Jewish wars of the latter biblical period, not to mention the violent civil unrest of the late Second Temple period.

Finally, in "A Jewish View of Christianity," Wyschogrod argues that the Rav's essay "Confrontation" must be read as a Straussian document, intended to permit the inter-religious dialogue that it ostensibly prohibits. This contention had little basis originally, and has been rendered nugatory by the publication of Rabbi Solovetichik's letters on the subject in *Community, Covenant, and Commitment*.[4] It further seems possible to me that his treatment of the Incarnation cited above is an unconscious example of the "trading of theological favors" that the Rav cautioned against in "Confrontation." The collection as whole, though, is a significant contribution to contemporary Jewish thought, and I hope that Wyschogrod's ideas will become part of the fabric of our Tradition.

NOTES

1. "The Body of Faith, God and the People Israel" (Aronson, 2000).
2. In "Israel, the Church, and Election," Wyschogrod writes that:

> Surely non-election does not equal rejection. Ishmael and Esau, the sons of non-election, are suffused in the divine word with a compassion in some respects more powerful than the love of the sons of election. . . . Not to be the favorite son of a human father is a painful experience, but . . . in the non-election of the nations there is also the father's love for all of his children.

As a result, Wyschogrod suggests, non-Jews should not be jealous of Israel, and Jews should not seek to deny God's relationships with other nations. These lines seemed wildly utopian when I first read them, but some weeks later an Episcopalian priest said to me, offhand, that "we Christians just need to get comfortable with being God's less-loved son." Perhaps the messianic era is nearer than I had thought.

3. *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003). This, of course, begs the question of whether any beliefs should be legislated, and I take leave to offer here some brief observations on that score. To some extent this issue is resolved by Nahmanides's defense of Bahag's failure to count belief in God as a commandment, on the grounds that the commandment could only be accepted by one who already believed. If God does not command belief in Himself, one could argue plausibly that commanding other beliefs is somewhat silly. One might also argue that beliefs are involuntary and therefore not subject to legislation. My own argument is that beliefs relate to an objective order of fact, and therefore depend on reality rather than will. In other words, the argument that the Tradition is binding even when in error, which has great force in the realm of law, does not apply to belief. It does not make sense to say that we are obligated to believe that which is not true in the same sense that one might contend that we are obligated to perform actions which, if not commanded, would not be good, or might perhaps even be evil, as an act can gain value from a relationship, but not a belief.

   Nothing in the above precludes censorship of ideas—true or false—on prudential grounds, namely ideas that if popularly believed would cause social disorder or religious decline. It is not obvious to me, however, that Maimonides' Second Principle has that degree of social significance in our day.
4. Ktav 2005, ed. Nathaniel Helfgot, pp. 247-268.

REVIEWER IN THIS ISSUE

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