

## **Kabbalistic Approach to Elohim**

Yisrael came to historical consciousness in a world dominated by great imperial powers, first in Mesopotamia where Avraham grew up, then in Egypt where a people became a nation. Imperial powers stayed in power through imposing force and violence on their own population, enslaving some, forcefully taxing others and exercising a monopoly on violence and cruelty.

No wonder, then, that the first issue confronting Yisrael was how to understand the nature and meaning of cruelty. One can read the Torah as a first, conflicted, sometimes ambiguous but often enlightening meditation on how to handle the cruelty that Yisrael were encountering in the world.

But the cruelty was not ONLY something imposed upon pure and noble beings by the outside--it was in Yisrael as well and DISTORTED US EVEN AS WE SOUGHT TO TRANSCEND IT.

Avraham, Moshe and alter Ezra were themselves products of the world of cruelty. Their perceptions and the ways in which they heard the voice of Elohim were shaped by the ways they had been distorted by the cruelty that reverberated through their own lives. Yet what they heard when they heard the voice of Elohim was a message that was very different from that heard by most of their contemporaries.

The ancient world was full of religious systems that validated the mystery and wonder of the natural order. They cycles of nature were revered and feared. But most of these religions saw the social world as another part of the same natural reality. Existing class systems, unfair distribution of wealth were as much a part of the natural order as the sunset. Throughout much of recorded history the oppressed have been socialized to believe that cruelty and oppression are a "natural" part of the structure of reality. Spirituality for them became identified with reconciliation to a world of oppression, either through learning how to "flow" with the world as it is or through imagining that the material world in which they lived was a prelude to some higher nonmaterial world, and that the task of the living was to escape material reality into this spiritual realm which embodied the purity and deeper reality that could not be attained on this earth.

Yisrael had a very different message: that this world could be fundamentally transformed. Spirituality and morality were not features of some other reality apart from this world, but were inherently ingredients of this world, because the Elohim who created the universe is also the Elohim who brought morality into the world, and we embody Elohim's spirit by being made in the divine image. On the Hebrew account, cruelty was built into social institutions and into the psychological legacy of human beings. It appeared to be an "objective fact" about human reality only because oppressive social arrangements are very hard to change and psychological legacies are very hard to uproot. But "very hard" is different from "impossible."

One need not be overly optimist about how quickly it is possible to overcome the legacy of cruelty or that it might take thousands and thousands of years. But from the standpoint of this sensibility, what we do, how we live, the kind of society we build, can contribute to the defeat of cruelty, not merely to its amelioration.

Not that Torah has some naïve notion of how easy that might be. Very early in the childhood of the human race, cruelty and violence emerge. As Genesis tells us a few chapters after creation, *yetzer ha'adam rah mee ne'urav*--which can be roughly translated as: there is some part of human beings that was already distorted from the experience our youth. The early experiences of the human race have left a legacy of pain that is passed on from generation to generation, creating a tendency toward malevolence that is also part of our situation.

What causes this distortion? Our Torah does not tell us. What it points to is the pain, anger and fury that come from non-recognition. Kayin seeks Elohim's acknowledgement that his contribution, his sacrifice, is as valuable as that of his brother Hevel, yet he does not get that sense of being recognized as valuable and contributing. In his pain and fury, he kills his brother.

When confronted by Elohim and asked, "Where is Hevel your brother?" Kayin responds with what becomes the classic line of distorted consciousness--as much the line of those who turn their backs on the homeless, the poor, the sick, oppressed, and the starving of the world today as it was of those who have in every age allowed themselves not to see the pain of others-- "Am I my brother's keeper?" Torah's unmistakable implication is that the moment one recognizes one's "other," one must simultaneously recognize the obligation toward caring and mutual concern.

If blame is to be assigned at all, it is to Elohim, who failed to give Kayin the recognition that he so badly needed; and it is perhaps out of this understanding of His own culpability that Elohim does not kill Kayin but instead only banishes him. Yet in raising the question about responsibility and in recounting Kayin's punishment, the Torah makes clear that it does not accept evil as some inevitability that must be accepted, but as a distortion that must be combated. This is NOT part of Elohim's scheme, and it causes Elohim shock and upset to discover this kind of behavior.

We may have the germs of what might be called a Biblical theory about the origins of violence. Cruelty is made possible when human beings do not recognize in each other the image of Elohim that is the essence of their being--and hence turn away from others; do not hear their pain. Once this process begins, it builds upon itself, becomes a powerful force that is transferred from generation to generation. The people living in material abundance, fearful that they will not have enough if they share with everyone who is hungry, protect themselves from knowing others' pain by allowing themselves to believe that these others are really not human beings like themselves. Hence it is okay to turn their backs on others' pain. And this is the key to racism of all sorts--the need to deny the others' right to be taken care of by finding some aspect of that other which makes the other NOT REALLY a human being like ourselves.

The good news of Torah is this: we are not stuck in this non-recognition. The Elohim of the Torah is the Force that makes possible a transformation of the world from one characterized by estrangement and lack of mutual recognition to one in which moral actions and compassion abound. This Elohim is YHWH--the Force of transformation and healing. Elohim is The Force that makes possible the movement of reality from that which IS to that which OUGHT TO BE.

The Torah thus places Transcendence on the agenda of the human race. Human beings need not be stuck in a world of pain or oppression. We can regain contact with a deeper level of being, a level more consonant with who were really are---namely beings who are created in the image of Elohim, who embody an inherent tendency toward goodness and holiness, toward being "embodied spirituality." Transcendence does not mean rejecting this world, but rather our ability to bring more fully into being in this world aspects of ourselves and aspects of reality that are already present in germ but which we need to nurture and develop within ourselves and each other. Every inch of creation, every cell of being, not only contains atoms stored with physical energy, but also contains and reflects the spiritual and moral

energy that we call Elohim. Much of the pain and oppression we experience in this world is a reflection of the way WE DO NOT RECOGNIZE ELOHIM IN THE WORLD IN ONE ANOTHER AND IN OURSELVES.

Many other religions had the intuition that something was fundamentally missing from human experience. But then they posited some higher realm apart from this world which would be the place where this higher reality dwells. Torah insists that this split between what is and what ought to be is not an ontological necessity. Elohim's absence from the world can be repaired and human beings can be partners with Elohim in the process of repair. This is what the word TIKKUN means--it is the word for this repair that is badly needed and possible.

Bringing Elohim back into the world involves recognizing one another both for that which is unique about each of us but also for the way that each of us shares this common potential to partially embody Elohim's presence in the world.

We become fully human when we come to know ourselves through a process of recognition by the other, whom we simultaneously recognize as a self-constituting subject capable of reflecting Elohim's goodness and love and as capable of seeing those same capacities within us. This mutual recognition is recognition not only of that which is unique within each of us, but also and most deeply of what we have in common--the way that the energy of Elohim manifests in each of us, making it possible for us to be free, creative, loving, caring, spiritually sensitive, conscious and self-transforming beings who both receive and embody Elohim's energy.

But transcendence is only possible, not inevitable. Each generation has layered into its psychic structure the histories of the past failures of transcendence, the accumulated legacy of the world of oppression. Those failures are embodied in the increasingly textured and powerful structures of domination that shape the social order, just as they are embodied in the individual's psyche and belief system. The system of persecution and oppression does not inhabit only the external world, although it is importantly and centrally there. It also infects our internal worlds of belief and feeling.

Each of us has gone through a complicated process of socialization in which our pain at not having received adequate recognition is transformed into anger and cruelty toward others. The non-recognition is communicated in thousands of ways from the moment the child is born. It is not unusual for children to have fantasies of violence; it is common to discover children engaged in little acts of cruelty. These are often symptoms of a child's need to control the already existing cruelty that he or she is subconsciously absorbing and reacting to in family life, preschool programs, television and social institutions. Yet Torah insists that all this can be transcended--that the world can be fundamentally healed. We can come to recognize one another once again as created in the image of Elohim.

On the one hand, Torah teaches that transcendence is always possible, always potentially at hand, because Elohim pervades the universe and is always present--and our task is *dah leefney mee at omedet*--know before whom you stand, because we stand before Elohim always. But on the other hand, human beings are in fact rooted in a complicated and flawed set of social relationships which have been internalized in all of our emotional and intellectual lives. So, we must strive for transcendence by manifesting compassion for the ways in which we and others are likely to fail to overcome our own inner and outer legacies of oppression.

Elohim is the Force of healing and transformation, the Force that makes it possible to break the tendency to pass on the pain and cruelty from generation to generation, the Force that makes possible the breaking of the repetition compulsion

In every generation those who have heard the voice of Elohim have also heard within themselves the voice of inherited pain and cruelty, and not infrequently we, like all other human beings, have attributed some of this cruelty to the voice of Elohim. The compilers of the Torah were no exception--they were human beings who struggled to hear the voice of Elohim, but they were simultaneously terrified to stay connected to the message of radical freedom that they heard. They retreated at times into hearing the more familiar messages, ones that seemed more congruent with their world of pain and oppression. They adopted pictures of Elohim as a big authoritarian man in heaven who was judging and angry. It was too difficult for them to always stay connected to their radical insight that Elohim was actually a force of goodness and love and healing.

So who is Elohim? Elohim is the Force of Healing and Transformation that calls the world to love and mutual caring.

But in every generation, people have been unable to fully stay with that vision of Elohim, and instead have turned Elohim into something that would fit the current level of development of human consciousness as it has evolved through history up till that moment. People can only understand Elohim within the categories and consciousness that they actually have.

The way that Elohim has appeared to different generations depends on their own level of cognitive, emotional, spiritual development of consciousness. There are many theories which outline the elements of these developmental stages. Let me present one that is presented by Ken Wilber in "Boomeritis". Here are the stages of consciousness presented by Wilber:

1. The Archaic-instinctual level. People at this level are primarily focused on basic survival needs: food, water, warmth, sex and safety have priority. People live in survival bands to perpetuate life and there is barely any sense of an individual self.
2. The magical-animistic level. At this level people imagine the world as filled with magical spirits, good and bad, which swarm the earth leaving blessings and curses, and spells that determine future events. People begin to form ethnic tribes, and see the spirits as existing in ancestors who bond the tribe. There is belief in voodoo-like curses, blood oaths, ancient grudges, and many superstitions. There are often a whole range of gods who are involved in these kinds of struggles with each other, and each tribe has a different Elohim which is valued as long as it is able to provide protection.
3. Feudal Power Elohim. Feudal lords protect underlings in exchange for obedience and labor. Feudal empires are established and promote visions of power and glory. Individual heroes are seen as emerging distinct from the tribe--and are envisioned as powerful, impulsive, egocentric and heroic. The world outside is a jungle full of threats and predators. In this consciousness we begin to see the emergence of a monotheistic conception of Elohim, often based on images of a powerful king who is able to conquer all enemies and is arbitrary and willful--and things are good to the extent that they are chosen by this king as His favorite
4. A righteous Order enforces a code of conduct based on absolutist and unvarying principles of "right" and "wrong." Life has meaning, direction and purpose with outcomes determined by an all-powerful Other or Order. Violating the code or rules has severe, perhaps everlasting repercussions. Rigid social hierarchies based on patriarchal and paternalistic assumption and validated by a code that rewards the faithful. There is only one right way to think and to act about everything. Law and order consciousness prevails, and impulsivity is controlled through guilt. Although this is often a religious world, a similar fundamentalist attitude can be held with regard to a Constitution or secular or atheistic code. Elohim is envisioned as the Law giver, but also as subject to or criticizable in accord with the Law--and sometimes envisioned as consulting the Law in order to decide how to act.

5. Individualistic and Objective consciousness and scientific achievement. At this level of consciousness, the self escapes the herd mentality of conformist rule and seeks meaning in individual terms. The world is seen as a rational and well-oiled machine with natural laws that can be learned, mastered and manipulated for one's own purposes. The individual is the center of reality, and seeks to maximize money and power and individual achievement. The laws of science rule politics, the economy, and human events. The world is a chessboard on which games are played as winners gain preeminence and perks while loser deserve to lose. Marketplace alliances help the individual manipulate the earth's resources--which are seen as existing solely to serve human needs. In this consciousness, Elohim is seen as having set the whole thing in motion but no longer involved directly, or involved only to the extent that He or She blesses whatever the individual achieves and validates that as What Elohim Intended. Or else Elohim is seen as the being Who wound up the clock which is now ticking on its own without any further divine involvement.
6. Pluralistic relativism. Communitarian and sensitive self consciousness. Networking is the ultimate imagery, and the human spirit must be freed from dogma, greed and divisiveness. Feelings and caring supersede cold rationality; cherishing the earth, GAIA, and life are valued. The consciousness here is decidedly anti-hierarchical--everything must be laterally linked. The self is permeable, the emphasis is on relationships and dialogue. Collective communities connected through freely chosen affiliations based on shared sentiments are seen as the only rational foundation for people being together. Decisions must be reached through reconciliation and consensus (and the downside here is that sometimes there is an interminable processing and incapacity to reach decisions at all). This consciousness is strongly egalitarian, anti-hierarchical, pluralistic, valuing diversity and multiculturalism, and emphasizing relativistic value systems. Elohim is envisioned here as the network of human relationships, no longer as having a human body. Elohim is feeling and love--and has no demands. Whatever feels good is what Elohim wants.

We are in a world in which some people are in stage 3, some in stage 4, some in stage 5, and some in stage 6. When we talk about "the Torah conception of Elohim" what we are often doing is arguing why the stage of development we are in is really the right one, and others are not authentic. But the truth is that they are all authentic in the sense that each of them has roots within the evolving consciousness of Yisrael, and a case can be made for each of these conceptions of Elohim.

Nor is the development of consciousness over. Throughout history there have been individual writers, thinkers, prophets, and mystics who have momentarily had illuminations in which they talked at even higher levels of consciousness--though they did not have around them a community of believers who could share and build upon these moments of illumination. So the moments became only moments. But in retrospect people at higher levels of development can look back and find roots in the past in this way. And so, too, for states of consciousness that are yet developing.

Each state of consciousness described here is one that transcends and includes previous stages. But for people in these six stages, the struggle to get beyond the ones below have been so intense that it is often hard for the people to cherish the previous steps or see it as a necessary and valuable step in the development of consciousness.

Wilber suggests that some of us are able to evolve to a yet higher level of consciousness, or a whole new tier of thinking, in which people can for the first time vividly grasp the entire spectrum of interior development and thus see that each previous level and each wave is crucially important for the health of the overall project of the development of consciousness. Even the Pluralistic Relativist consciousness can't grasp this--it tends to be crusadingly anti-hierarchical, and fiercely negative about any view that talks about excellence or about value rankings or big pictures.

That kind of judgment changes with second-tier thinking which is fully aware of the stages of development and appreciates the necessary role that each previous stage plays.

Ken Wilber and others have described at least two stages in this second tier, but they imagine many more.

1. Integrative consciousness. Life is a kaleidoscope of natural hierarchies, systems and forms. Flexibility, spontaneity and functionality have the highest priority. Differences and pluralities can be integrated into interdependent natural flows. Egalitarianism is complemented by natural degrees of excellence where appropriate. Knowledge and competency should supersede rank, power, status or group. The prevailing world order is seen as the result of the existence of different levels of reality, and the inevitable patterns of movement up and down the levels of consciousness.
2. Holistic. Universal holistic systems, waves of integrative energies, uniting feeling with knowledge. Multiple levels interwoven into one conscious system. There is a universal order, but in a living, conscious fashion not based on external rules or group bonds. A grand unification is possible, in theory and in actuality. Sometimes this involves the emergence of a new spirituality as a meshwork of all existence.

Now, what kind of Elohim will be appropriate for this higher level of consciousness?

Well, it is first of all a way of thinking about Elohim that recognizes that Elohim has evolved along with human beings. If we find that too hard to grasp, then to say that Elohim has many different faces and that different faces of Elohim become appropriate for different historical periods. And the face of Elohim or dimension of Elohim that we need to know about depends on the stage of development of the entire society. At different stages, different *partzufim* or appearances of Elohim became prominent. The Torah itself makes this point when it says that Elohim tells Moshe that "I appeared unto Avraham, unto Yitzhak, and unto Yaakov as El Shaddai, but by My name YHWH I made me not known to them.

Yisrael did not have to invent the notion of the world as sacred--that already was common knowledge. Torah focused on bringing to the world a revelation about an aspect of Elohim that was not adequately known or appreciated--Elohim as the Force that makes for the possibility of transformation. It took the Elohim, the various forces that had been understood to be sacred, and it recognized them as one unified Force, a Force whose essence was freedom, love, justice, transcendence and compassion.

This dimension of Elohim is uniquely appropriate for the current historical moment--the past five thousand years. So long as the world is facing the specific problems of material scarcity and societies in which some human beings dominate others and misrecognize others, this aspect of Elohim's reality is critical. When these problems have been solved, when human beings are able to live together in accord with the basic injunctions of Torah (e.g. loving the stranger, seeking justice pursuing peace) other aspects of Elohim's reality may appear to be more central to our common agenda.

But as the human race enters into a different stage of consciousness, it may be ready for different language about Elohim. Once you get that Yisrael has had a long history of evolving conceptions and languages about Elohim, you can get beyond the feeling that it is somehow inauthentic to talk in different language. You are not rejecting "the Jewish concept of Elohim" when you no longer believe in some All-powerful, All-knowing Unmoved Mover who sits in heaven and sends down blessings or curses according to His mood, or a Elohim who can be influenced by a nice-smelling lamb chop, or later by a well-intoned and correctly said prayer.

In fact, even in the past there were Jewish sages who pointed to the fact that the Ten Words suggest that we ought not to try to imagine Elohim in terms of anything that is in the heaven above or the earth beneath, because Elohim is not an idol that can be put into these forms. Torah and the tradition seem to suggest that Elohim is Ineffable--beyond our language. Or, as Maimonides argued, Elohim can be discussed only via negatives, through statements about what Elohim is not.

One reason many smart and sensitive people have trouble thinking about Elohim is because they imagine Elohim to be a Being who could and should have intervened to lessen the sufferings of the Jews, and didn't. This is Elohim at stage four as I described it. Although they know that they could never relay believe in an Elohim of this sort, though they don't really believe in this Elohim, they are angry at "him" for not existing, and so won't allow themselves to know the Elohim that does exist.

There's every reason to be angry that the world has been so full of hatred and evil, and--to the extent that one want to conceptualize Elohim in terms of a powerfully big spirit in the sky that could have intervened and didn't--there's even reason to be angry at this kind of Elohim. I don't think we need to hold on to that vision of Elohim--but it may be psychologically necessary to express some anger at that Elohim as part of the process of moving beyond those kinds of pictures that we absorbed while growing up in this culture.

And this may not be a one-time experience of anger. It may be that throughout lives there will be moments when we need to do some processing, or even expressing anger, at the Elohim who does not exist--just to get beyond that set of feelings so we can open to an Elohim more appropriate to our current level of development. Once we leave the Elohim who does not exist we become open to the Elohim who does exist.

But who is the Elohim who does exist?

I can tell you that as we move to higher levels of consciousness in thinking about Elohim, the language we use in the coming period will be more holistic, will recognize and give priority to the notion of Elohim as the Unity of All Being, in whom everything exists, but who is more than all that exists, yet manifests through all that exists. We will begin to conceive of a universe whose every cell is a manifestation of spirit and is held together by the ultimate gravity of the universe, which is the gravity of Elohim's love.

We will be thinking in spiritual terms rather than in mechanistic terms, and we will be using those terms to describe phenomena like consciousness, health, and happiness more in terms of spiritual categories and categories connected to love than we have in the past--where we tended to think we could explain something if we could reduce it to a physical reality as in physics or chemistry, or if we could explain it in terms of a kind of mechanistic interaction of psychic energies.

Instead, we will be thinking in more holistic terms in which feelings will not be separated from knowledge, and in which Elohim becomes the Unity of All Being evolving through time to higher and higher levels of consciousness and self-consciousness.

I want to emphasize that our knowledge of Elohim will always be very partial. We are to Elohim as a cell in our liver is to our conscious mind. The liver cells, when isolated and put under a microscope and attended to from the standpoint of empirical science, function according to certain bio-chemical "laws." Yet they are also alive in a very different way than science can describe--they have consciousness, albeit the consciousness of a liver cell. They receive and emit messages which are processed by the central nervous system and the brain, and ultimately they are known to our conscious minds. Normally we don't pay much attention to our liver cells, but when there is deep trouble there (e.g. pain caused by cancer) we become aware of this part of our bodies. Once aware, we can send different messages to the liver. We can, for example, visualize the liver as healthy and functioning, visualize ourselves as sending healing energy to the liver, and sometimes get empirical proof that this visualization has had an impact on healing the liver. The liver cell is part of the liver, which is part of the entire body. It is conscious of the totality of which it is part, but only in the limited way that a liver cell could be conscious.

Human beings stand in something like this relationship to Elohim. Elohim is the totality of all Being and all existence that ever was, is or will be, and more than that. At any given moment we are part of Elohim and Elohim is part of us, but we are not all that there is to Elohim. Nor is Elohim simply the sum of all physically existing things in the infinite universe, though that is also part of Elohim, just as a given moment of our conscious experience is a part of who we are at that moment, though not all of who we are at the moment and certainly not all of who we are in our totality.

When Elohim communicates to us, we can receive messages from IT, but only the messages that we can process given our receptors and our particular level of consciousness. Just like the liver cell, we intuit and "know" that we are part of some larger totality, that we are serving a purpose in the larger story. But just like the liver cell, we have only a very limited vocabulary for describing what the larger story is, even though we "know it," can feel it in every ounce of our being, at least when we are not deflected from knowing by certain poisons within our system.

One problem you might have with the story I've told here is that it seems to suggest that Elohim is just the physical universe. But that concern is based on a faulty assumption: that there is a physical universe in any conventional sense of what we mean by physical.

The truth is that as we begin to evolve into higher levels of consciousness we begin to see that objects themselves are actually energy fields in which "energy events" seem to happen, and in which particles emerge and disappear back into energy. Everything that once seemed dead or quiescent or dormant is in fact alive. The whole way we view the universe, in terms of objects, is a function of the level of complexity of our receptors of sense datum--receptors which are unable to see at the microscopic level and to reveal the way in which these so-called objects are themselves complex arrangements of energy fields.

We get a fuller picture of reality when we see ourselves as composed of millions of these complex energy fields that are coming into existence and dying and standing in relationship with trillions of other such energy fields. When the mystics talk about Elohim breathing us and the breath of Elohim traveling through our every pore, we get a language that tries to say that there is no radical division between the dancer and the dance, between the outer and the inner, between that which is object and that which apprehends and categorizes objects. The solidity of objects is merely a particular way for a particular being, us, with our limited sensory apparatus, to arrange the flux of energies for the sake of certain survival tasks.

The universe is pulsating with spiritual energy, and every ounce of Being is permeated with and an extension of that spiritual energy. Just as our sensory apparatus is inadequate for capturing the energy forces that are play in the nuclei of all the cells that constitute the visually observable objects of the world, so too our conceptual apparatus provides us with inadequate tools or means to apprehend the rich web of spiritual reality in which we and all of Being are embedded. And yet we have enough hints that most human beings through most of history have been aware of this dimension of reality and have sought to respond to it. We respond through awe, wonder radical amazement and celebration--even as we may bemoan our inability to describe it adequately or persuasively to those whose spiritual sensors have been shut off in some way or other.

When we talk about human beings as part of this totality that is Elohim, and as part of the totality of all that which has been, is and will be, we have no intention of giving a naturalistic picture of human life, or nature, because by naturalistic we mean an account that reduces the world to that which is the case, or can be described in language, or can be reduced to set of things that interact with one another in law-like ways.

In the language of the emerging new states of consciousness, we can put it this way: everything is alive, capable of interacting with the rest of the universe in increasingly conscious and self-determining ways as matter organizes itself in greater and greater complexity, and everything is permeated with Elohim's spiritual energy.

Might it help here to talk about Elohim as the mind of the universe, including ever part of the universe within it and you yet reducible to any part of it.? The danger of this way of talking is that it suggests that this mind is like ours. But it would be more accurate to say that we are part of this mind, as a particular theory or orientation might be part of our own minds.

If that makes sense to you--and each of these formulations is necessarily radically flawed--then we might think of human beings as the particular way that Elohim is becoming self-conscious, the mechanism in Elohim for Elohim's becoming self-aware.

The dangers of this formulation are obvious: it seems to pretend a huge importance to human beings, and it puts Elohim back into step five of the consciousness stages described earlier.

But what I like about this notion is that it captures another aspect of Elohim that I've been implicitly suggesting--that Elohim is in the process of evolving. Elohim is what we call an emergent--Elohim is in the process of emerging and changing with us. So Rabbi Nachman read the line in our liturgy that say "Avraham knew You Elohim from his youth" as something like "Avraham knew You Elohim when You were still new in the Elohim-business."

Elohim may not he been fully evolved when IT created human beings, and IT needed human beings to assist in that process. Elohim created human beings in order to become more self-conscious. This way of talking, of course, is a way of challenging the subject/object distinction, and insisting that Elohim is the One, *Ayn Ode*, *Ayn ode* as we say in the *Aleynu* prayer--there is nothing else, nothing that is not part of Elohim. On at least some variants of some eastern traditions, self-consciousness is a distortion to be transcended. But from a Hebrew perspective self-consciousness is a valuable state which human beings can contribute to the world, analogous to the way that plants contribute photosynthesis. One need not be arrogant about the contribution if one sees it as just one of many necessary and valuable ingredients that make up the totality of Elohim's creation.

Nor am I suggesting that human being originate or create consciousness--we only tap into a large pool of consciousness that surrounds and pervades and underlies all Being. The Kabbalists talk of Elohim contracting in order to create the space for human beings, so we might say that Elohim's contraction is a contraction of the consciousness pool in order to allow specific beings to embody that consciousness and to develop it toward self-consciousness, and then, eventually, toward consciousness of the totality.

But there need be no inflated sense of human importance here--not only because of the transparently inadequate job we have been doing of knowing ourselves and our Elohim so far, but also because insofar as we develop a larger holistic consciousness at stage 8, we become aware of the silliness and fundamental misunderstanding of Being that is involved in taking our individual selves too seriously. In the light of stage 8 holistic consciousness, to see ourselves as being one of Elohim's forms of self-awareness is to see ourselves as having a responsibility and a task rather than as having special status and entitlement--just as breath might imagine itself as having a special responsibility, and as indispensable to our human life, but not as therefore entitled to more than contributing to the wellbeing of the totality.

And we should note that even when we see humans as one way in which Elohim may become conscious, we have no particular reason to believe that what we call consciousness is anything more than a tiny part of the spectrum of what the consciousness of the entire universe may experience as consciousness.

So we need more humility. Not the distorted humility that led some religious people to say in the past "we are nothing compared to Your greatness" and then mixed that with "just as we are nothing in comparison with Elohim, so are the animals and the natural world nothing compared to us--so we have every right to exploit, dominate, and abuse it because it was made for our service just as we were made to serve Elohim." No, not that--but a humility that says: we see ourselves as part of the totality of Being, understand that nature itself is permeated with the spirit of Elohim, and recognize that the chosenness of the human species, our ability to develop a certain level of self-consciousness and consciousness of the totality, is at the same time an obligation toward compassion, caring and stewardship.

Now, let us for a moment imagine that the entirety of all that which has been, is, and will be is filled with a spiritual energy and consciousness of which our own consciousness and our own experience of spirituality are but bare points--like the intuition or knowing that a liver cell might have about the totality of the being in which it is both a constituent part and a receptor of its tasks and messages.

When we know in this way, Jews are inclined to respond to what we knew by addressing a "Thou." Is it anything more than a peculiarly human presumption to address that larger totality as a Thou, to imagine it as having personality and emotions? Is this just a human presumption to address that larger totality as a Thou--as in *Baruch Atah YHWH*? Certainly in the frame of Hellenistic thought it would be--because we would be thinking of a Thou in terms of the weaknesses associated with personality and the neediness associated with emotion.

As a rabbi deriving my approach from the insights and language of the Torah, there is nothing belittling or inadequate about emotion, need, personality or incompleteness. This is a point developed more fully by Abraham Joshua Heschel in his important book *The Prophets*.

A Greek imperialist may have felt the need to develop a conception of perfection in which the fully healthy being was one that had no needs or emotions, and the Roman centurion may have been trained to distance himself from feelings and needs in order to become the perfect mechanism for world conquest. For them, feeling was an inadequacy or lack. But why should that influence my concept of Elohim? From the standpoint of the Torah, to be human is both to be created in the image of Elohim and to be in relationship with Elohim. And Elohim is in relationship with human beings, needs human beings, cares

about human beings, and is in a process which is not yet completed and in which human beings have a partnership role. This is a uniquely Jewish conception of Elohim, developed in Kabbalah and Hasidic thought and brought by Abraham Joshua Heschel.

The richness of human emotions, the wealth of nuance and excitement that can be generated by human neediness, the depth of love that can be generated by human relationships--these magnificent aspects of reality are likely to be aspects of Elohim as well. Why should Elohim be any less wonderful than human beings? If one rejects the notions of perfection that come from Hellenistic and patriarchal thought, then one could easily see that attributing emotions, personality, feeling, and caring to the spiritual Being that permeates all of reality is not a put-down or a belittling, but a celebration in Elohim of what we can and ought to honor in human beings.

So, the holistic view of the universe will see Elohim in this way: as the Force that makes for the possibility of transformation for that which is to that which ought to be a force that is compassionate and caring and loving. And we have every reason to believe that that Force will further reveal to us and through us dimensions of its Being that we do not yet have the capacity to experience or articulate. The future of the human race is deeply tied to this experience of the self-revelation of Elohim to and through human life, and we can be sure that future generations will look back on our own level of awareness of Elohim in the same way that we might look back upon those who used a patriarchal or power-over others model of the Divine such as we might find in stages three and four.

In short, the task of birthing the next stage in consciousness is a joint task--and it is one that faces each of us as a personal decision about how to lead our lives.

This is the task of Yisrael at this moment--to birth the next stage of consciousness of the human race, and in so doing to bring Elohim's presence more fully into the world. We can make our own contributions to this process, each in our own ways. And as we do so, we can rejoice in the marvelous opportunity to serve Elohim with joy, love and celebration.